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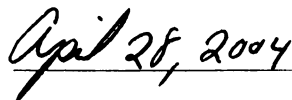
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ERITREA AND EXILE:
TRANS/NATIONALISM IN THE HORN OF AFRICA AND THE UNITED STATES

VOLUME I

By

Tricia M. Redeker Hepner

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

ERITREA AND EXILE: TRANS/NATIONALISM IN THE HORN OF AFRICA AND THE UNITED STATES

by

Tricia M. Redeker Hepner

Since the late 1960s, Eritreans in the United States have been active participants in ongoing efforts to define the Eritrean nation. They have also contributed extensively to the political-economic viability of the emergent state. During the nationalist revolution war of independence from Ethiopia (1961-1991), the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) likewise reached out to Eritreans living abroad for material and ideological support. Following independence, the state under the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) has continued these efforts to administer and control its exiles, their identities, and the communities, civic organizations, and political institutions that link them to the nation-state and local Eritrean society.

This dissertation draws together critical approaches to nationalism, transnationalism, and civil society in the context of globalization to examine how Eritreans in the United States form a component of trans/national civil society for the Eritrean state. Through a detailed ethnographic and historical study carried out in both the urban United States and Eritrea, it examines the bi-directional flows connecting the two locations and assesses the impacts and consequences of these on the Eritrean nation-state, local Eritrean society, and exile communities in the US. More specifically, it critically examines transnational social field as arenas of power in which a deterritorialized state and society struggle with one another for meaning and authority. The concepts of trans/nationalism and trans/national civil society are developed to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the ways that transnational processes can limit and repress as

well as emancipate and enable, and to reveal how Eritreans in the US both support and contest the state and its hegemonic definitions of national identity and belonging. Finally, this study details how and why Eritreans have culturally appropriated western and globally-constructed ideas associated with democracy, civil society, citizenship and constitutionalism and applied them to Eritrea's nationalist past and present.

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2004

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the people of Eritrea
and to Eritrean communities abroad, wherever they may be.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible were it not for the support and cooperation of numerous individuals and institutions. Operation Crossroads Africa first introduced me to Eritrea in 1995. A National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship supported my graduate study from 1997-2000, and four consecutive Title VI Foreign Language Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships allowed me to study the Tigrinya language at Michigan State University. The Graduate School and the Department of Anthropology at Michigan State University jointly awarded me a Distinguished Doctoral Fellowship, which supported different phases of my training, field research, and writing. A Social Science Research Council International Dissertation Research Fellowship and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research Dissertation Fieldwork Grant enabled me to conduct fieldwork in Eritrea in 2001. A Samuel S. Fels Fellowship at the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies in Philadelphia during the summer of 1999 allowed me to hone my fieldwork skills and introduced me to the rich African immigrant scene burgeoning throughout the urban United States.

At Michigan State University I am most grateful to the Department of Anthropology's faculty and staff, especially Dr. Lynne Goldstein, and above all my (evolving) dissertation committee. Dr. Laurie Medina and Dr. Bill Derman worked together as co-chairs in a most amicable and productive way, each offering me encouragement and support, always pushing me to think harder and go deeper. They have been more than brilliant advisers: they have been mentors and friends. Dr. Andrea L. L. guided me through theoretical forays into transnationalism and identity and taught me a lot about being and becoming a teacher. Dr. Judy Pugh's early question "*where are the people?*" reminded me to always place actual Eritreans at the center of this study. The late Dr. Jacob Climo also showed enthusiasm for my work, finding much in common with his own interest in diaspora, memory, and family networks. His feedback and



presence is sorely missed. And the late, great Dr. Harold Marcus provided me with a wonderful foil to bounce off ideas, always encouraging me to hone my arguments, to think independently, and pursue my own interests in Horn of Africa studies. I can only hope that my study would have met his high standards and provoked the kind of extended and spirited debate from which I would have learned so much. And finally, Dr. David Robinson in the Department of History, who stepped into Harold's giant shoes, has set those standards perhaps even a sight higher. I thank him for his participation and for setting an unparalleled example of excellence in scholarship and teaching.

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In Eritrea I am especially grateful to Esaias Tseggai and Kedija Adem for providing me with a home (more than once) and the comforts of family life. Their constant company and that of Selam, Milen, Ream, Nardos, Senait, Lemlem, Abeba, Mussie, Aron, Yisaq and even Whoopi helped keep loneliness at bay. I also wish to thank Dan Connell, Dr. Araia Tseggai, Tesfai “Gomera” and Gebremikael “Lilo” of PFDJ (who were especially kind and helpful), Azieb Tewelde, Alemseged Tesfai, Iyob Gerezghier, and Enshu at the Research and Documentation Center, and finally, Dr. Peter Schmidt, Dr. Uoldelul Chelati, Dr. Ogbagabriel Berakhi, Dr. Asmerom Kidane, and Shushan Berhe at the University of Asmara. Finally, my friends Aron, Buruk, Bahre, Sirak, Aman and Natsinet, Yosief and Selam, Mikal and *enda* Aboy Solomon, Suleiman, Francesca and Rachel were great company to keep. I am indebted especially to Simon Mesfin, who

taught me the meaning of the proverb *mengedi mis wedi Adi*, “travel the road with a local.”

And I save the best for last. My parents Nancy and Jim Redeker believed in me enough to not only encourage my work but to actually try reading it as well. Their love and support was key to my endurance. Ana Isabel Ortiz was my ever-present muse. Terry and Maxine Hepner, and all my cherished California clan, offered their support and understanding during my final (and highly anti-social) stretch of writing. And my husband, soulmate, and comrade in arms, Randal Hepner, provided unconditional love and the kind of intellectual respect and faith in me that most people can only dream of having in their lives. I have no words strong enough to properly thank him for being there and for being himself.



PREFACE

I first encountered Eritrea, almost accidentally, in 1995. Nurturing a growing intellectual and personal interest in Africa as an undergraduate anthropology student, I sought a path that would bring me to the continent as more than just a traveler. Although I had long desired visiting Ethiopia, Operation Crossroads Africa, Inc. -- a predecessor of the Peace Corps -- accepted me into their new Eritrea program. I knew only the bare minimum about Eritrea: that it used to be the northernmost province of Ethiopia until it achieved independence in 1991, after waging one of the longest wars in modern African history. I was therefore unprepared for both the intensity of the experience and the impact it would have on the course of my life. For much of the summer of 1995 I lived in a village called Nefasit, twenty-five kilometers from Asmara, where I worked alongside teams of American and German volunteers and over one hundred and fifty Eritrean high school students on a reforestation and anti-erosion terracing project.

Executed by the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) as part of the Eritrean government's national reconstruction campaign, the project allowed me to learn a great deal about Eritrea's struggle for independence and the subjective meaning of nationalist identity for Eritrean people (and youth especially). It also introduced me to the dialectic I would later see reflected throughout Eritrea and its exile communities in the United States: an indomitable thirst for dignity, development, and freedom; and a deeply wounded national psyche and landscape, scarred by physical destruction, displacement, and other unresolved grievances. Unwittingly, Eritreans allowed me to stumble into an intimate national conversation, and I have been held captive by it ever since.

The outbreak of the Ethio-Eritrean border war in 1998 altered all of my plans for further research in the Horn of Africa. Abandoning my earlier interest in studying the relationship between the nationalist movements of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) of northern Ethiopia, I cast about for a project that would sustain the rigors of graduate study and yet accommodate the realities of an unstable region. Through Eritrean friends and acquaintances in the US, I had become increasingly familiar with the activities of diaspora communities, particularly as they responded to the new turn of events in Eritrea. A summer fellowship at the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies researching new African immigrant communities in my hometown of Philadelphia awakened me to a new area of study. Already through my intensifying study of the Horn of Africa I was familiar with the presence of Ethiopians and Eritreans in the United States since the 1960s.

As my knowledge of Eritrea and the wider Horn region deepened and my naive enthusiasm gave way to more complicated understandings, many striking juxtapositions emerged. One was the dialectic between hope and despair I have already noted. Another was the intertwined yet disparate experiences of those belonging to opposing political movements, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF). Still another was the remarkable continuities, sustained connections, and simultaneous alienations I observed between Eritreans living abroad and the Eritrean state and society. And not least of all was the similarity I perceived between Eritrea and the United States during a time of turbulence and rapid transitions.

It is approaching cliché to note that anthropology and the anthropological endeavor teaches us as much about ourselves and our own societies as it does about “the

Other” we study. Yet, during my period of fieldwork among the Eritrean community of Chicago, and later in Eritrea itself, I often found myself reeling from the impact of uncanny object lessons. First, the ethnographic research I conducted among resettled refugees and exiles proved more emotionally powerful than I bargained for. Although I was aware of the vitality of Eritrean nationalism in the lives of men and women, I was taken aback by the openness with which my interlocutors plumbed the depths of their experiences and feelings. It often seemed as though great torrents of emotion had been heaving against the floodgates for so long that only a few interview questions and the intimacy of private conversation were needed to blow them wide apart. But it was not until I arrived in Eritrea for a further six months of research that I truly appreciated the power of what was entrusted to me.

The months I spent in Eritrea, from July to December 2001, proved to be milestones in the history of that country as well as in the United States, and indeed, the rest of the world. They also illuminated everything I had learned about Eritrean communities in the United States, both the concrete issues I had studied and the more esoteric, inner aspects of national identity. Not only did the events of September 11 pass before me with a horrific, dreamlike quality as I joined throngs in Asmara hotel lobbies to watch the World Trade Center crumble over satellite television, but the gathering political unrest in Eritrea gained momentum with an eerily similar sense of unreality and foreboding. As I helplessly observed chaos consume the city I once called home, the routine loneliness and isolation I felt as a foreigner and fieldworker transformed itself into the utter strangerhood Eritrean exiles in the US had described to me in such painful detail. For the first time in my life I felt some kind of identification with my own

Americanness as I watched the landscape of New York City transformed to smoking rubble from my temporary life on the far side of the planet. For just a fleeting moment, it seemed as though I too knew how exile felt, and the terror and fury that comes from watching your homeland rent asunder.

And then came the fallout. As I observed and participated obliquely in the urgent, rising debate in the United States over what constitutes American identity and the meaning of democracy -- Does a patriotic citizenry always support its government's decisions in times of war? Is national defense a good enough reason to violate our own and others' civil and human rights? -- I also became captivated by nearly identical debates unfolding in Eritrea. For, in the wake of the Ethio-Eritrean border war, the Eritrean government too had fallen victim to internal and external criticisms. Citizens at home and abroad who questioned the government and clamored for democracy at a time when the state's security hung in the balance were rapidly labeled traitors to the nation. And as I voiced my own shame and outrage in correspondence to family and friends in the US during the American invasion of Afghanistan, I alienated more than a few for what they felt were decidedly un-American opinions. Eritrea and America seemed to converge within me, and in my disorientation and grief I achieved a new level of consciousness and insight, one that all the research designs and methodologies in the academic world could not have anticipated.

If there is one overall lesson that I derived from these confluence of events and my own entanglements in them, it is that the process of nation-building and struggles over the manner in which citizens and states relate to one another -- no matter how long in the making -- are always intrinsically incomplete and fraught with contradictions. For



this reason, I do not claim that this study presents a “final analysis” of anything in Eritrea’s past or present. Rather, it is a slow exposure snapshot over time, itself embedded in a time and place, that documents the trajectory of several interrelated threads as they have come to form a coherent pattern. That pattern comprises part of a larger collection of narratives and events that are the story of the Eritrean nationalist movement and quest for a state. Some of these events and narratives are well known, and some are already lost forever.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS.....	xi
CHRONOLOGY OF ERITREA AND EXILE.....	xx
INTRODUCTION.....	1
The Culture of Transnational Political Struggle.....	1
Frames of Reference: Trans/Nationalism and Trans/National Civil Society.....	2
The Research Setting and Methodology.....	8
Narratives, History, and Ethnography.....	15
Presentation of the Study.....	17
PART ONE	
HISTORY, REVOLUTION, EXILE.....	19
The Politics of Writing Politicized History.....	19
Approaches and Arguments.....	23
CHAPTER ONE	
COLONIALISM, RESISTANCE, AND NATIONALISM:	
ERITREA TO 1961.....	26
The Lay of the Land: Eritrea's Cultural Kaleidoscope.....	26
Geography and Ecology.....	26
Populations.....	26
Fluidity and Fixity: Pre-Nationalist Eritrean Society.....	30
Changing Colonialisms: Italy, Britain, Ethiopia.....	30
Italy, 1869-1941.....	30
British Military Administration, 1941-1952.....	30
The Ethio-Eritrean Federation, 1952-1962.....	40
Violence, Rebellion, and Displacement: Origins of Nationalist Sentiment.....	40
Lowland Class Struggles.....	40
State Violence and Public Dissent.....	50
Symbolic Violence.....	50
Displacement and Exile.....	56
Concluding Remarks.....	55
CHAPTER TWO	
A TALE OF TWO FRONTS: NATIONALISM AND	
POLITICAL IDENTITY IN THE ELF AND EPLF.....	60
The Ethnography of Political Identity: Formative Moments.....	60
Divergent Nationalisms and Political Identity.....	60
Nationalism and the 'Politics of Exclusion': The Eritrean Liberation Front.....	60

Origins and Structure.....	60
Contrasting Nationalist Grains.....	6
Sectarianism and Fragmentation.....	7
Pluralist Nationalism.....	7
Nationalism and the Homogenization of Identities: The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front.....	7
Origins and Structure.....	7
Justifying Synthetic Nationalism.....	79
Expanding Synthetic Nationalism: Organizing the Masses.....	80
The Locations of National and Political Identity.....	90
Birthing the Eritrean Family: The Implications and Uses of Kinship.....	92
Patterns of Political Identity.....	9
The Eritrean Civil War: ELF vs. EPLF.....	99
A War Without Beginning or End.....	100
Concluding Remarks.....	104
PART TWO	
CONSTRUCTING TRANS/NATIONALISM IN ERITREA AND EXILE.....	106
From Eritrea to Exile.....	107
Approaches and Arguments.....	108
CHAPTER THREE	
TRANS/NATIONAL <i>TEGADELTI</i> : EFLNA AND EPLF TO 1979.....	112
The Road Trip: An Allegory.....	112
Coming to America: Ethiopian and Eritrean Students in the United States.....	115
The Early Days: EFLNA, the ELF, and the EPLF.....	119
Small Axe: The Power and Autonomy of EFLNA, 1971-1977.....	127
Building the Movement.....	127
Consciousness and Contradiction in EFLNA.....	136
A Double-Edged Sword: The Return to Meda and Other Stories.....	141
Consolidating Trans/Nationalism.....	142
Trans/Nationalism and Its Discontents.....	146
The Demise of EFLNA, 1978-1979.....	151
Mass Organizations and the Surrender of EFLNA's Autonomy.....	151
Concluding Remarks.....	165
CHAPTER FOUR	
<i>ERTRA AB SEDET</i> : REFUGEES AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING IN THE UNITED STATES.....	168
Broken Ranks: ELF and EFLNA in the United States.....	168
Coming to America, Again: Refugee Resettlement.....	170

Encountering Political Identities: ELF and EPLF in Exile.....	174
<i>Ertra Kom</i> : Defining and Constructing Community in Exile.....	183
The Dissolution of EPLF Mass Organizations and the Push for Community.....	183
Community Associations and EPLF's Trans/National Agenda.....	188
From Independence to the Ethio-Eritrean Border War.....	195
Eritrea Is Free: Whither the Community?.....	195
At Home Abroad: Situating an Ethnography of Eritrean Chicago.....	198
'If We Are to Share This Chicago': Community Institutions and the Search for Unity.....	210
Concluding Remarks.....	223
 PART THREE	
NATIONALIST STATES, TRANSNATIONAL SOCIETIES.....	225
Trans/National Genesis	226
Approaches and Arguments.....	229
 CHAPTER FIVE	
OF TIES THAT BIND AND SOMETIMES CHOKE: THE ERITREAN TRANS/NATIONAL SOCIAL FIELD.....	232
Through the Looking Glass.....	232
The Ties that Bind: From Unions and the State to Kinship and Cyberspace.....	237
Mass Organizations After Independence.....	237
NUEW and NUEYS as Trans/National Bodies.....	241
The Front, the State, and the Party: From EPLF to PFDJ.....	251
EPLF Chapters in the 1980s.....	251
From EPLF to PFDJ: A Trans/National Transition.....	253
The Trans/National Body Politic.....	257
Religious Bodies: The Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Churches.....	263
Trans/National Religious Identities and Institutions.....	267
NGOs or GONGOs? Self-Reliance and Reliance on the State.....	273
Indigenous NGOs and Trans/National Development.....	277
Networks of Kin and Friendship.....	282
Internet Communication and Communities.....	289
The Ties That Choke: Trans/Nationalism's Janus-Face.....	293
Trans/National Dissonance in the 21st Century.....	296
Concluding Remarks.....	305
 CHAPTER SIX	
A TRANSNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY: POWER, AUTHORITY, AND BELONGING IN ERITREA AND EXILE.....	307

Sovereignty and Its Consequences.....	31
Resistance Revisited: Eritrea at the Crossroads.....	31
Reform as Dissent: The Groups of Thirteen and Fifteen.....	31
Dissent and Punishment: Students, Journalists, and An Anthropologist.....	32
The Search for Democracy and Civil Society at Home And Abroad.....	32
Locating Democracy in Eritrea.....	32
Democracy, Political Identity, and Reconciliation.....	32
Practicing Democracy, Citizenship, and Constitutionalism.....	33
Democracy and Trans/National Dissonance.....	33
Trans/National Civil Society.....	34
Civil Society, Modernity, Globalization.....	34
Trans/National Civil Society in Eritrea and Exile.....	34
Concluding Remarks.....	35
CONCLUSION.....	36
Eritrea and the Global Context.....	36
Looking Forward.....	36
APPENDICES	
The Berlin Manifesto.....	36
Open Letter to Members of the PFDJ.....	37
Glossary of Tigrinya (and Arabic) Terms.....	39
BIBLIOGRAPHY	39
Primary Sources.....	39
Research and Documentation Center, Asmara.....	39
Personal Collection of Araia Tseggai.....	40
Michigan State University.....	40
Internet Sources.....	40
Other.....	40
Secondary Sources.....	40

Key to Abbreviations

AECC	Association of Eritrean Community in Chicago
AESNA	Association of Eritrean Students in North America
AEWNA	Association of Eritrean Women in North America
AENF	Alliance of Eritrean National Forces
BMA	British Military Administration
EDF	Eritrean Development Foundation
EDF	Eritrean Defense Forces
EDC	Eritrean Defense Committee
EFLNA	Eritreans for Liberation in North America
EFLE	Eritreans for Liberation in Europe
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELF-RC	Eritrean Liberation Front - Revolutionary Council
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
EPLF	Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front
EPRP	Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party
ERA	Eritrean Relief Association
ERRA	Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Agency
ERC	Eritrean Relief Committee
ERCCS	Eritrean Red Cross and Crescent Society
ESUNA	Ethiopian Students Union in North America
GONGO	Government-organized non-governmental organization
GUES	General Union of Eritrean Students
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
LWF	Lutheran World Federation
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NUES	National Union of Eritrean Students
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women
NUEY	National Union of Eritrean Youth
NUEYS	National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students
PGE	Provisional Government of Eritrea
RICE	Research and Information Center on Eritrea
TPLF	Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USCR	United States Committee for Refugees
VOLAG	Voluntary agency
WCC	World Council of Churches

Chronology of Eritrea and Exile

1580-1821	Sudanese Funj Dynasty control Western Eritrea for various periods
1557-1865	Ottoman Turks dominate Red Sea coast and Eastern lowland areas
1813-1885	Egyptians occupy Massawa and raid Western Eritrea for various periods
1869	Italians purchase port of Assab
1875-1876	Egyptians invade highland regions; defeated by Emperor Yohannes IV
1885	Italians occupy Massawa; Egyptians depart Eritrea
1890	Italians create colony of Eritrea
1935-1941	Italians invade and occupy Ethiopia
1941	Italians defeated in World War II; British Military Administration occupies Eritrea
1949	Independence Bloc forms from Eritrean political parties
1950	United Nations federates Eritrea to Ethiopia as an autonomous region
1952	Beginning of Ethio-Eritrean Federation
1953	Woldeab Woldemariam goes into exile in Cairo, Egypt
1955	Eritrean Students Club forms in Cairo with funds from Nasser regime
1956	Ibrahim Sultan goes into exile in Egypt
1958	General Strikes in Asmara Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) forms in Port Sudan
1960	Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) founded in Cairo
1961	ELF begins military campaign and armed struggle in Western Eritrea
1962	Ethiopian annexation of Eritrea ELF establishes its Revolutionary Command in Kassala, Sudan
1965	United States passes Immigration Act, opening doors to migrants from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East
1966	ELF begins sending recruits to China, Syria and Cuba for training
1967	ELF reorganizes at the Adobha conference
1968	General Union of Eritrean Students (GUES) forms in Damascus, Syria, supporting ELF ELF succeeds in driving ELM out of Eritrea
1970	Splinter groups from ELF begin coalescing Eritreans for Liberation in North America (EFLNA) forms in New York following Ethiopian massacre at Keren (December)
1971	Woldeab Woldemariam, Osman Saleh Sabbe, and Taha Mohamed Nur visit the United States to petition the UN and meet with EFLNA activists in New York City
1972	ELF begins civil war against proto-EPLF factions
1973	Splinter groups merge to form EPLF
1974	Ethiopian revolution; Derg comes to power in Addis Ababa
1975	Osman Saleh Sabbe absconds from EPLF EPLF strengthens its ties with EFLNA and other organizations in exile
1977	The Ethiopian Derg regimes enters into an alliance with the USSR EFLNA votes to become a mass organization of EPLF
1978	EPLF withdraws from liberated areas of Eritrea

1979 EFLNA condemns EPLF leadership and breaks with the front
 EFLNA dissolves
 1980 United States passes the Refugee Act, opening the opportunity for
 resettlement to Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees
 EPLF opens chapters of itself throughout the US and other exile locations
 1981 EPLF drives more than 18,000 ELF fighters and their affiliated civilian
 population out of Eritrea and into Sudan
 1983-1985 Eritrean and Ethiopian resettlement to the US reaches its peak
 1985 Association of Eritrean Community in Chicago (AECC) forms initially
 1989 EPLF dissolves mass organizations worldwide and proposes community
 associations in diaspora
 1991 EPLF liberates Eritrea
 1992 EPLF issues its Proclamation on Citizenship/Nationality, declaring anyone
 born of one Eritrean parent anywhere in the world a citizen, or national, of
 Eritrea
 1993 Eritrea holds referendum on independence, 99.8% of all voters support
 independence
 1994 EPLF transforms itself into Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice
 National Service program instituted
 1998 Border war with Ethiopia breaks out
 2000 Group of 13 (G-13) releases “Berlin Manifesto” from exile
 2001 Group of 15 (G-15) in Eritrea releases Open Letter to Members of the
 PFDJ
 Eleven members of G-15 arrested and detained; suspected sympathizers
 with G-15 detained; independent student union smashed; private presses
 closed; journalists arrested and detained;
 2002 EPLF-DP reform party formed by Mesfin Hagos in exile
 ELF-RC chapter in Chicago formed

INTRODUCTION

I. The Culture of Transnational Political Struggle

This dissertation is about the culture of transnational political struggle. It analyzes how often violent efforts to construct national identities and control territories and administrations occur transnationally through space and time, drawing diverse and dispersed populations into a common, yet contentious, nation and state-building process. Through historical and ethnographic methods, it captures the dilemmas faced by a modern nation-state born during the postmodern era of globalization and midwived by the multi-stranded cross-border practices scholars now refer to a "transnationalism" (Basch et al 1994; Foner 1997; Glick-Schiller 1995, 1999; Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001; Levitt 2001; Louie 2000; Portes et al 1999; Sassen 1998; Smith and Guarnizo 1998). It explores the way in which states can extend authority far beyond their physical territories to incorporate national subjects in far-flung worlds, and the way those subjects, in turn, both support and defy the state's power to define the person, the citizen, the society and the nation.

This dissertation is about the struggle to create Eritrea, the newest country in Africa and a striking example of what Glick-Schiller and Fouron (2001) refer to as a "transnational nation-state." Although small, marginalized, and controversial for its uncompromising approach to nation- and state-building, Eritrea has actually been at the cutting-edge of major socio-political trends associated with globalization since the late 1960s. Among these trends are the realignment of the formerly stable homology between nation and state (Casanova 2001; Malkki 1995b), the deterritorialization of state power (Basch et al 1994; Glick-Schiller 1999; Louie 2000), new practices and identities associated with "flexible citizenship" (Ong 1999), and the transcultural adaptation of

hegemonic global constructs of governance and social power like democracy and civil society (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Kaldor 1999; Kaldor et al 2003; Kasfir 1998; Keane 2003; Mamdani 1996).

At the core of all these processes, however, lies the reality of exile and its ambivalent incorporation into nationalist identity and the struggle for state sovereignty in Eritrea. From colonialism to revolution to the achievement of independence in the early 1990s, the story of Eritrea includes the forced dispersal of over one million of its citizens worldwide and their simultaneous gathering-in again through an elaborate web of relationships we call a “transnational social field” (Basch et al 1994; Glick-Schiller and Fouron 1999). In one respect, the story is about the efforts of 3.8 million people who share a common historical experience -- and despite staggering odds -- achieved the unity of purpose to both survive and triumph in their quest for a state over nearly a half-century of upheaval. In another, it is about the great prices paid for the sake of “sovereignty” and the ways Eritreans have inflicted and endured injustice in their quest for *hadde hizbi*, *hadde libi*.¹ Perhaps more than anything else, it is an illustration of how politics -- and territorial nationalism in particular -- not only constitutes culture and subjectivity (at least in part), but remains an enduring force in a world increasingly characterized by the permeability of borders, the mobility of peoples, the hybridity of identities, and the global cultural diffusion of concepts like democracy, civil society, and rights.

II. Frames of Reference: Trans/Nationalism and Trans/National Civil Society

The central thesis of this dissertation is that Eritreans in the United States, who are intensely and problematically bound to the Eritrean state via an historically-constituted but unevenly developed transnational social field, comprise a particular form of civil

¹ ሓደ ህዝቢ ሓደ ልቢ “One people, one heart,” a current Eritrean national slogan.

society that is at once embedded in the localized history of the nationalist struggle as well as the more expansive condition of exile in the west.

Beginning in the early 1970s, Eritreans in the US and the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) in Eritrea together mapped out a socio-political arena defined by a set of ideological relationships and organizational linkages that connected the front and its supporters abroad discursively and materially. The objective behind this arrangement was to further the goals of the nationalist revolution under EPLF and, ultimately, secure Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia. While these linkages largely included mass organizations of students, workers, women and youth prior to independence, they have since grown to include entities as varied as churches, non-governmental organizations, family networks, and the Internet. Together with the one-party state under the Peoples' Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), a reincarnation of EPLF, these entities comprise what I refer to as the Eritrean trans/national social field.

Today, this historically-constituted trans/national social field represents a kind of deterritorialized location or "third sector" (Itzigsohn 2000:1141) where the Eritrean state and its dispersed society struggle with and among one another to redefine national identity and citizenship, maintain or capture state power, and seek or repress avenues for broader social empowerment. In both their support of the Eritrean state and their resistance to its authority and hegemonic definitions of nationalism and citizenship, Eritreans who participate in the trans/national social field act as a trans/national civil society vis-à-vis an increasingly authoritarian state.

In current scholarship, transnationalism has been broadly defined as "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch et al 1994:7). My claim to the term trans/nationalism (as opposed to transnationalism) is specific and intentional. First, use it to critically examine how transnational social fields are utilized for highly localized nationalist purposes, such as establishing legitimacy, securing territorial borders,

accessing human and material resources, producing proper national subjects, and resisting certain “external” pressures. Second, the term helps capture the tension between “trans” and “nationalism,” between space and place, by drawing attention to the ruptures and contradictions inherent in the process even as it defies the spatial and juridical constraints of the territorial nation-state.

To this end, I situate my analysis within a detailed historical context, examining the origins and development of the Eritrean trans/nationalist project and how violence and instability necessitated exile as a location for nationalist and civic activism from as early as the 1940s. In doing so, I draw upon both the growing literatures on transnationalism, displacement, and diaspora in the context of “globalization” (Basch et al 1994; Baubock and Rundell 1998; Fuglerud 1999; Glick-Schiller and Fouron 1999; Glick-Schiller 1995, 1999; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996; Malkki 1995a, 1995b; Sassen 1998; Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Van Hear 1998, 2002; Werbner 2002) as well as treatments of nationalism that emphasize the importance of place in the imaginations and lived realities of the people who originate there (Anderson 1991; Calhoun 1997; Chatterjee 1993; Featherstone 1996; Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001; Malkki 1995a; Williams 1989, 1991). However, I also push the parameters of these debates to suggest that the power-laden and uneven character of transnational institutions and practices (Portes et al 1999) has contradictory consequences for nationalism as well as for the actors engaging in such practices. These contradictory consequences give rise to what I refer to in this study as “trans/national dissonance,” wherein localized nationalist objectives clash with those constructed vis-à-vis exile, the west, and larger global pressures. Additionally, the contradictions within trans/nationalism give rise to new forms of political action (Itzigsohn 2000; Vertovec and Cohen 1999; Smith and Guarnizo 1998) including deterritorialized state power and trans/national civil society.

This intimate connection between nationalism and transnationalism is neither new nor unique to Eritrea. Numerous scholars have redirected our attention to the enduring

linkages between the nation-state, nationalism, and transnational migration in the past and present (for example, Baubock and Rundell 1998; Foner 1997; Glick-Schiller 1999; Itzigsohn 2000; Portes et al 1999; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Smith and Guarnizo 1998; van der Veer 1995) rather than suggesting that the latter weakens the former (Appadurai 1998; Bhabha 1990; Kearney 1995). Since the history of Eritrea includes the exodus of millions of its citizens to neighboring African countries, the Middle East, Europe, and North America, the very definition of the Eritrean nation has included the condition of exile. In the past, this originated with the early nationalist mobilization spearheaded by students and workers living in places like Sudan, Egypt, and Syria. More recently, it was evidenced in the efforts of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front to incorporate its supporters in exile into the revolution materially and ideologically. Today, it continues with the state's inclusion of exiles in its population estimates, its efforts to regulate their activities and identities at home and abroad, and its 1992 citizenship proclamation, which grants certain kinds of "rights" to Eritreans living and born abroad (as well as requires certain kinds of commitments from its citizens). Thus, exile participation in the nation-state has been integral to the nationalist movement since the 1940s both for ideological and economic reasons. Where the EPLF once depended upon exiles' financial support and access to external resources during the revolution, the state now draws an estimated one-half of its nominal GNP from remittances and other kinds of investment like government bonds or donations, and an annual 2% tax levied on all Eritrean adults.

However, trans/nationalism is also unpredictable and a potential liability for the Eritrean state. Eritreans living in the US and other foreign countries have long adopted ideas, identities and practices that conflicted with the more narrow nationalist objectives of first the EPLF and now the independent state. Similarly, the history of the nationalist struggle is itself highly contested and marked by bloody civil strife: in the early 1980s, the EPLF defeated and exiled from Eritrea the first armed liberation movement and its rival for power and control, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). The vast majority of former

fighters and civilian members of the ELF made their way as resettled refugees to countries around the world (including the US), complexifying the existing trans/national social field constructed by the EPLF in the 1970s and dramatically complicating nationalist objectives before and after independence. This particular group of exiles, others who did not actively support the EPLF, have often resisted the deterritorializing authority and administrative presence of the front, and now the Eritrean state, in their communities and lives. Although all Eritreans living abroad remain linked to Eritrea, the trans/national social field mapped out by EPLF during the nationalist revolution have also utilized other kinds of resources and mobilized other identities or agencies to intervene into Eritrean society or to resist the state's authority. The very unevenness of the Eritrean trans/national social field, as this study will illustrate, now offers space for resistance against the state and hegemonic nationalism. As Smith and Guarnizo (2001) note, the incorporation of trans/national subjects into sending states inadvertently creates up interstitial spaces which create multiple possibilities for novel forms of human agency" and "provide possibilities for resistance as well as accommodation to power 'from above'."

In recent years, and especially since the Ethio-Eritrean border war of 1998, the Eritrean state has become more repressive internally and has sought to tighten control over its citizens abroad to retard the flow of "social remittances" (Levitt 2001), both economic ones, into Eritrean society. The trans/nationalist social field has therefore become a battleground where nationalist identity, alternative loyalties, state jurisdiction, and the meaning of citizenship are contested. It is also a kind of laboratory for the adaptation and deployment of ideas and practices associated with democracy and civil society with which Eritreans in exile have engaged, and which they now seek to implement in Eritrea as they grow increasingly disillusioned with an exclusivist and militarized nationalism. Drawing upon models of governance and social power that have been hegemonic across the globe, Eritreans both at home and abroad are utilizing the

trans/national social field to push the Eritrean state towards the forms and practices deemed most “appropriate” for nation-states in the contemporary world. In both discursive and practical pursuits, contemporary Eritreans in exile have connected with their local counterparts to emerge as a trans/national civil society that both reproduces the power of the nationalist state and also defies it.

In these ways, both concepts of trans/nationalism and trans/national civil society help us to analyze the multiple, contradictory effects of transnationalism in specific national contexts by looking critically at what transnational flows enable and disenable in diaspora communities and the sending state and society. Thus, moving beyond the origins, character, content, and types of transnational social formations, identifying transnational flows (see Faist 2000; Glick-Schiller et al 1999; Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Marjorie Ong 1999), this dissertation details the multiple, unanticipated, and contradictory effects that exile communities shape power relations in sending and receiving societies. Drawing on Glick-Schiller and Fouron 1999, 2001; Itzigsohn 2000; Levitt 2001; Laguerre 1999, this dissertation also foregrounds the repressive and limiting aspects of transnationalism (Al-Ali and Koser 2001) rather than its emancipatory potentials. The concept of trans/nationalism alerts us to the importance of historically grounding specific forms in specific places (Guarnizo and Smith 1998), the intimate links between nation and migration (Vijay Prashad 1995; Veer 1995), and how states and societies struggle with one another, and are altered by transnational practices.

Similarly, the notion of trans/national civil society helps us address the social and political impacts of trans/nationalism, as well as how diaspora Eritreans are thinking and speaking about themselves simultaneously in relation to the global world, nation-states, American society, and Eritrea. Specifically, it illuminates how Eritrean perceptions of practices associated with democratization and civil society -- including models of citizenship, constitutionalism and the rule of law, freedom of information, speech, and association, and popular participation in political processes -- are re-

once to the historical and socio-political dynamics of the Eritrean nationalist revolution as well as the late 20th century experience of sojourn in the west. By engaging certain concepts that belong to the realm of what scholars refer to as “global civil society” (Casanova 1994; Kaldor et al 2003; Keane 2003; Lipschutz 1992; Walzer 1997), Eritreans create a middle ground that draws upon much broader discourses and traditions that they seek to ground and apply them within Eritrea’s nationalist past and present. These efforts highlight the way in which politics is as much a culturally-constituted set of ideas and practices as it is a project of power and governance (Gledhill 1994; Greenhouse 2002; Herzfeld 1997; Kertzer 1988).

III. The Research Setting and Methodology

While Eritrean Studies has established itself as a genuine area of inquiry in the past decade, the vast majority of research to date has focused, rather narrowly, on the historical and political conditions surrounding the thirty-year struggle for independence from Ethiopia (1961-1991). Few contemporary ethnographic studies have yet to address life on Eritrea since independence, including those addressing the Eritrean diaspora and the internal sector of the Eritrean nation-state.² As a multi-sited study undertaken in both Eritrea and the United States, this dissertation represents a unique contribution to the still small but growing body of social scientific literature on Eritrea. It also contributes to current debates among researchers of Eritrea to push beyond the insularism that has characterized African studies generally, and Eritrea especially, to situate the Eritrean case within broader global debates and contexts.

At the same time, however, because Eritrea is both new and unstable, much more research has yet to be done on its past and present. Many scholars who begin working in Eritrea find themselves overwhelmed with the possibilities and challenges of studying a country in

² Notable exceptions include Al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001, 2002; Compton 1998; Hepner 2003b; Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001; Moussa 1993; Tronvoll 1998a, 1998b.

that was largely unavailable to researchers for nearly forty years, and whose historical social records suffered neglect and damage over decades of war and occupation. To this extent, then, Eritreanists continue to wrestle with the exceptionalist tendencies precipitated by a new region of study and the considerable task of creating a corpus of knowledge that provides a context for contemporary concerns. At the same time, however, great pressure exists to move beyond analyses of Eritrea *in situ* and situational knowledge we learn about it in relationship to other countries, case studies, and trends. I myself grappled with this tension throughout this study.

Two distinct periods of ethnographic fieldwork were undertaken for this study. For both these periods I worked exclusively with qualitative historical and ethnographic methods, including documentary or archival analysis, participant observation, and comprehensive interviews with individual men and women (as well as some informal focus group settings). During the first period of field research, I spent a total of eleven months in the Eritrean community of Chicago, Illinois (September 2000 to July 2001) where I drew upon my previous experiences or pilot research with Eritrean communities in Michigan (Detroit, Lansing, and Grand Rapids) and Pennsylvania (Philadelphia) to help focus my research techniques and questions. I conducted a second period of fieldwork in Eritrea itself, from July 2001 to December 2001, where I utilized much of the information I had gathered and relationships I had developed with Eritreans in Chicago to shape my data collection in Eritrea.

Guided by a research question that asked how and why Eritreans in the US have drawn upon their experiences in the west to stake claims on the Eritrean nation-state and how the state in turn had staked claims on them as deterritorialized citizens, I set out to investigate the history, trajectory, and consequences of Eritrean trans/nationalism. Following Guarnizo and Smith's (1998:24) notion of the meso-structural vantage point where "institutions interact with structural and instrumental processes" to capture the complexity of transnational processes, my research design identified distinct segments

the Eritrean trans/national social field as points of entry into, and connective threads between, exile communities like Chicago and the Eritrean nation-state. These components included historic mass organizations of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), such as associations of women, workers, students, and youth; religious bodies, including the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Eritrean Catholic Church, and newer evangelical Christian congregations; political groupings, such as chapters of the former EPLF and now the ruling party of the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), as well as more recent groups based on oppositional or reformist platforms; informal social and kinship networks; and indigenous non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The objective was to study the origins of these linkages between Eritrea and exile, their institutional durability and scope, the content and vectors of the flows occurring within them, and the effects on both the Eritrean community of Chicago as well as the Eritrean nation-state over two distinct time periods: pre-independence (1961-1991) and post-independence (1991-present). However, the unexpected explosion of the Ethio-Eritrean border war in 1998 represents a significant rupture to this periodization and dramatically influenced the situation in Eritrea and exile as well as the research design itself, as this dissertation will also address.

Chicago, where the bulk of the US portion of this research took place, hosts a small and rather unremarkable Eritrean exile community. With a total population of less than 1000, including children, the Chicago Eritrean community is dwarfed by both the much larger Ethiopian community (numbering about 5000 persons) and other hubs of Eritrean activity, such as Washington DC, the San Francisco Bay Area (especially San Jose and Oakland), Los Angeles, San Diego, Dallas, Atlanta, and even Seattle. At the same time, however, the small size of the community made it much easier for me to become familiar with the majority of its members and to gain perhaps a more intimate understanding of the activities and issues which defined peoples' lives. Despite its small size the Chicago community possessed all of the institutions I had identified in my

research design and was exceptionally vibrant, if often disorganized (and decried as such by its own constituents). It was also a deeply troubled community, as I discovered, riven to the core by historic grievances embedded within the revolutionary nationalist years, conflicts of political identity, and a suspicion and mistrust that the constant presence of the Eritrean trans/national nation-state aggravated considerably.

Immersing myself into the life of the Chicago community, I became a full-time participant-observer in an array of social activities and relationships. I attended weekly services of Orthodox, Catholic, and Pentecostal services; regular meetings of the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW); political education sessions and business meetings of the PFDJ party; newly formed meetings of the Eritrean Liberation Front-Revolutionary Council (ELF-RC), an opposition party-in-exile; and other meetings of ad-hoc groups such as the Eritrean Defense Committee, which was formed during the Ethio-Eritrean border war. I also socialized with individuals and families, attending countless events such as baptisms, holiday parties or events, dances with live music, food, and drink (called *gwyla*), informal gatherings at coffee shops and bars, and graduation celebrations. Through the course of fieldwork, I cultivated more intimate personal relationships with several individuals whose friendship offered further insights into the experiences of Eritreans as a whole.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted two phases of open-ended interviews. The first phase was with individuals identified by their peers (according to snowball sampling techniques) as longtime residents or community leaders. These interviews helped me understand the history of the community, its organizations, its major internal dynamics, and general orientation towards the Eritrean nation-state. Second tier interviews were then conducted with a randomly-generated, stratified sample of community members derived from a list that had been created at the time of the 1993 referendum on Eritrean independence. These interviews helped me gain more specific knowledge about peoples' life histories, activities, and attitudes vis-à-vis their

community, the United States, and Eritrea. Altogether I conducted forty-five interviews in Chicago.³ I also collected historic documentation of community events, such as meeting agendas, primary documents written by US-based organizations in English, Tigrinya, and contemporary materials produced and distributed by the PFDJ party, ELF-RC, NUEW, and the Orthodox, Catholic, and Pentecostal churches.

In July 2001, I traveled to Eritrea to begin fieldwork in Asmara and other urban locations throughout the country, using the organizations I had studied in Chicago as points of entry into local society and the state itself. Beginning with historic organizations, which had formed the foundation of the Eritrean trans/national solidarity movement in the 1970s, I conducted archival research at the Research and Documentation Center in Asmara, where I analyzed English and Tigrinya documents issued by the EPLF and other organizations of students, youth, and women in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. Other documents included letters exchanged between the EPLF leadership and activists in the US, minutes of meetings and national congresses, political education materials, syllabi, and research and educational material published by Eritreans in the US during the nationalist revolution. I also collected publications by EPLF and other mass organizations reporting on the activities of Eritreans abroad. The bulk of these documents had been published in the 1970s and 80s.

I conducted three general types of interviews in Eritrea: with government officials; with leaders of organizations such as the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) and the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS), clergy of churches, and NGO supervisors; and with relatives or close friends of Chicago interviewees. Interviews with government officials focused on the historic policies of the EPLF toward the diaspora, as well as those of the independent state. Many government officials

³ For the most part, the names of interviewees and certain details of their lives have been changed to preserve their confidentiality. In some cases, however, peoples' real names have been used in order to maintain an accurate historical record. In the event that their statements were of an especially sensitive nature, I either used a pseudonym or refrained from indicating a speaker.

been activists in the US prior to independence or had served as organizers abroad. perspectives, as well as those of officials now leading new departments or projects dealing with diaspora affairs or integration, helped provide an historicized view of trans/national social field as well as of current state policies and attitudes towards

I then interviewed leaders of NUEW and NUEYS, as well as clergy of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Pentecostal churches. In each case I elicited information about the origin of these organizations, their relationship with branches in the US, and how to perceive and measure the vectors of trans/national influence; in other words, how to or do not provide channels of mutual integration between Eritrea and exile. Once in Eritrea I discovered the role of indigenous NGOs in facilitating technology and knowledge transfers and conducted several interviews with leaders of NGOs and volunteers from abroad.

Finally, I interviewed a sample of relatives and friends of Chicago interviewees about their ongoing economic and social relationships, the frequency, substance, and media of their contact, and their perspectives on the ideas or behaviors of their relatives or friends abroad. In several cases, Chicago interviewees were visiting Eritrea during the time I was conducting research there, enabling me to observe and discuss their interactions or perspectives on local society in “real time.” Altogether I conducted 10 interviews in Eritrea.⁴

I supplemented all of these methods with participant observation and Internet-based analysis of trans/national social and political activities and debates. I also wrote detailed fieldnotes on Eritrean social life and the presence of exiles in the everyday realities and imaginations of those at home, including on television, in the news, or

⁴ As in the Chicago portion of my data, I typically assigned pseudonyms to speakers or altered details of their statements to protect their identities. Exceptions here include certain public figures, such as government officials, who consented to the use of their real names. Again, however, if I judged any speaker’s statement to be particularly sensitive or potentially dangerous, I preserved their confidentiality by either changing the person’s name or not assigning one at all.

daily conversations. I collected hundreds of postings from popular Eritrean websites like Asmarino.com, Awate.com, Dehai, Eritrea1.org, and Shaebia.org as examples of the kinds of debates and resources circulating between Eritrea and exile, and the kinds of movements emerging at home and abroad.

As is the case with any research undertaking, my assumptions, questions, and ideas about Eritrea and exile became both richer and more complicated through the process of collecting and analyzing data. Prior to beginning fieldwork, I had expected exile communities perhaps had greater power and autonomy vis-à-vis the Eritrean state than what the data actually indicated. Relatedly, I discovered that I needed to place the EPLF, and then the state under PFDJ, at the very center of the study: as a trans/national administrative force, the state bore down heavily from above, as Eritreans both in Eritrea and in Chicago struggled between and among each other to support and contest the state's power and its definitions of national identity and belonging. In developing a more complex understanding of how the Eritrean state and its trans/national society related to one another, I came to understand that my original research question had underestimated the role of the state as a major structural force acting upon both the trans/national institutions connecting Eritreans at home and abroad, as well as the communities and individual actors who participated in them. I had also not anticipated the intense fragmentation within Eritrean exile communities like Chicago, nor the repressive elements of trans/nationalism which disempowered Eritreans at home and abroad, even as they pursued spaces for resistance and autonomy. Finally, I was surprised to discover the rising debates about democracy and civil society that had emerged following the Ethio-Eritrean border war were expressing as much about the dilemma facing Eritrea's nationalist state in a transnationalizing world as they were about historic grievances lodged deep within Eritrean society, culture, and the revolution itself.

IV. Narratives, Histories, and Ethnography

Crafting an analysis of Eritrea and exile is rife with challenges. Some of these are related to the objective difficulties of researching and writing about a relatively closed, post-revolutionary society whose restrictiveness and self-censorship makes inquiry and discussion a potentially dangerous pursuit for both the researcher and the researched. Other challenges are related to the as-yet “unknown” quality of Eritrean history, culture and society. Not only are sources (whether archival or ethnographic) rather difficult to access due to the impacts of war and political instability, but the unfamiliarity of Eritrea to most audiences usually requires that substantial background information be provided in order to make sense of contemporary conditions. Finally, because Eritrea’s quest for national identity and statehood has been so shaped by internal conflicts and power struggles, multiple clashing narratives of the past and present compete at every turn, rendering truth and fact maddeningly elusive.

This dissertation is, in many ways, an historical ethnography. While its chief concern is actually the contemporary dilemmas associated with the culture of trans/national political struggle and the encounter between territorial nationalism and globally- constructed models of democracy and social power, I discovered through the course of field research that none of these made much sense unless carefully situated within the historical context of the Eritrean revolution and the outmigration of so many of its people. Indeed, several scholars have pointed out the necessity of historicizing transnationalism and the context of forced migration (Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001) in order to better understand the implications of transnational processes for migrating communities and sending and receiving states. Similarly, in the case of civil society, Mamdani (1996:14) has argued that current claims to democratization and civil society require an historical analysis in order to comprehend how analogies between Africa and the west have been constructed. An historical

approach seemed appropriate for all of these reasons. It also seemed important because so little has been written about the specifically Eritrean issues dealt with in this study, such as the problem of ELF and EPLF political identities, the role of exiles in the nationalist movement, or internal community dynamics in places like the US. I felt that readers who did not know very much about Eritrea could not fully appreciate the current issues facing the country and its dispersed population without first understanding the structural conditions of war, revolution, and forced migration to the west.

Additionally, as I came to discover, taking an historical approach also amounted to a kind of research strategy with two ethnographically productive dimensions. First, when conducting research under conditions of political instability and in community settings where trust between research participants was often in short supply, addressing events or debates that had occurred in the past allowed people to discuss issues or answer questions that had a direct bearing on current events, but in a way that seemed safer for everyone due to its removal from the immediate present. Secondly, approaching current issues through a roundabout discussion of the past also helped me identify the way in which competing narratives or clashing views on the present had emerged out of conflicts within the historic nationalist movement itself. Thirdly, opening virtually all interviews with past events -- and particularly those with government officials and local Eritreans who feared reprisal from authorities -- helped establish trust between myself and my interlocutors. Putting my interviewees at ease and demonstrating to them my own knowledge of Eritrean history often permitted a careful segue into more sensitive topics that would have likely remained off-limits otherwise.

And finally, my decision to retain an historical focus throughout an anthropological inquiry was in some ways a deliberate response to the anguish I observed among so many Eritreans as they wrestled with the same dilemmas in their communities and relationship to the Eritrean nation-state that my study aimed to address in a different way. While most Eritreans with whom I spoke revealed a well-developed consciousness

of the national past as they had personally experienced it, a collective disorientation also seemed to cloud their gaze, engendering confusion, misunderstanding, and sometimes hostility within exile communities and between Eritreans at home and abroad. The sense of fragmentation Eritreans seemed to feel, and particularly those whose lives had been shaped by exile, appeared to me to find its coherence only by reaching back to a time -- even it existed -- when the pieces were not yet so broken.

However, in assembling the pieces and narratives I have gathered among Eritreans into my own, I have also been reminded how all cultural processes, all histories, all political struggles, and all texts are essentially composites of competing memories of the past and dynamic perspectives on the present. Eritreans, both those in exile and those at home, have remembered events and narrated them to me and to one another in ways that serve contemporary political purposes. Thus, throughout this study, I have tried to carefully balance the different interpretations of the past and present I discovered among Eritreans, and to avoid deliberately staking a position on what does or does not constitute truth. It is hardly an original proposition that truth, fact, and objectivity are all relative, and perhaps nowhere is this more true than during times of massive social and political upheaval, such as during revolutions and wars. It is my hope that the narrative I contribute here may possibly help Eritreans to view their own in new ways.

V. Presentation of the Study

This dissertation is divided into three parts, consisting of two chapters each and an introduction for each part. Part One, *History, Revolution, Exile*, provides an historical background to modern Eritrea and an overview of the debates, approaches, and themes that characterize the field of Eritrean Studies more broadly. Chapter one offers an analysis of pre-nationalist Eritrean society and the early mobilization for independence, including that which took place in exile. Chapter two is an exploration of the nationalist movement for independence through the lenses of the two rival revolutionary fronts: the Eritrean

Liberation Front and the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front. Both chapters one and two therefore provide key background information that contextualizes the contemporary culture of trans/national political struggle.

Part Two, *Constructing Trans/Nationalism in Eritrea and Exile*, shifts our focus from Eritrea to exile communities in the United States. It explores ethnographically the development of the trans/national social field in the 1970s and 1980s and the ways in which the EPLF as a statelike entity came to dominate the terms of trans/national relations. Chapter three examines the origins of this process through a detailed account of the EPLF's relationship with the independent mass organization Eritreans for Liberation in North America. Chapter four moves into the 1980s and early 1990s to explore both the reconfiguration of Eritrean exile communities following the exile of ELF out of Eritrea and refugee resettlement in the United States. Both chapters look at how community organizations in exile have been shaped by trans/national state power and the ways in which they adopted modes and discourses of resistance, including claims to democratization and civic autonomy.

Part Three, *Nationalist States, Trans/National Societies*, carries the narrative from Eritrea and exile into the contemporary moment to flesh out important arguments about the unevenness of the trans/national social field, its limiting and repressive features, the way in which it offers novel spaces for resistance that derive their meaning at once from historic conflicts within the nationalist movement as well as the realities of exile and more broadly, globalization. Chapter five details the different components of the trans/national social field today, and how the Eritrean state and dispersed society struggle with one another for power and authority, and to what effect on each. Finally, chapter six explores the meanings assigned by Eritreans to democracy, civil society, constitutionalism, and citizenship to illuminate how politics is culturally constructed within the trans/national social field, and what this says about larger issues facing Eritrean as a nationalist state in a transnational world.

PART ONE

History, Revolution, Exile

[The Angel of History's] face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage, and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got hold of his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

If the purpose of history is the description of the flux of humanity and of peoples, the first question to be answered, unless all the rest is to remain unintelligible, will be: What is the power that moves nations?

Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

1. The Politics of Writing Politicized History

The British historian A.J.P. Taylor wrote, “History gets thicker as it approaches recent times.” His predecessor E.A. Freeman noted that “History is past politics, and politics is present history.” And implying perhaps a caustic summation of the two, playwright Jean Cocteau declared, *L’Histoire est un alliage de réel et de mensonge* (“History is a combination of reality and lies.”)¹

Indeed, no history is quite so thick with the politics of past and present as is constructed by modern nationalism, as it wrestles contingencies and contradiction with the coherence of real or imagined statehood. In the Horn of Africa, these “struggles of history and identity” (Sorenson 1993) have been particularly costly. Discursive constructions of the past and present, imbued with the weight of life and death, become bearers of ideological positions that share stake in the outcome of conflicts and their representations. Often formed in times of turmoil, Ethiopian and Eritrean historical narratives play upon one another’s interpretations of the past to lend or deny legitimacy to contemporary projects. Similarly, debates internal to each country’s community of knowledge reveal pasts that are equally contested within regions. For the scholar or researcher, crafting one’s own narrative in the midst of such tension carries its own particular challenges.

Several positionalities have emerged in contemporary Eritreanist scholarship over the past two decades. Many authors have attempted to adopt several at once as they speak to multiple audiences or distance themselves from ideological claims.² Nonetheless, the literature on Eritrea, however, are the historical and political analyses produced

¹ A.J.P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965; E.A. Freeman, *Methods of Historical Study* (1886), p.44; Jean Cocteau, *Journal d’un inconnu [Diary of an Unknown]* (1953). New York: Paragon House, 1988 [1953].

² BBC Correspondent and longtime Ethiopia observer Patrick Gilkes once referred to Eritreanist scholarship as possessed of “the guerrilla groupie syndrome” (1991). Contemporary scholars continue to wrestle with that pejorative image as they develop more critical approaches.

Eritrean academics and foreigners sympathetic to Eritrean nationalism (see for example, Cliffe and Davidson 1988; Connell 1997; Gebremedhin 1989; Pateman 1990; Yohannes 1991; Iyob 1990, 1995, 1997; Wilson 1991). These accounts, uneven in their rigor and intention, explore the development of the Eritrean nationalist position and seek to reinforce its legitimacy. While such accounts contain a wealth of valuable and often well-researched information, most should be read as partisan narratives that support the aims of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) in particular. This literature focuses largely on constructing Eritrean nationalism vis-à-vis Ethiopian nationalism.

Another trend reflects what Herzfeld (1997:14) terms *disemia*, or “cultural intimacy”: the process of debating and constructing narratives within a particular nation’s semi-private community of knowledge. The notion of cultural intimacy captures “the tension between official self-presentation and what goes on in the privacy of collective introspection” (Ibid). Although tensions between different historical interpretations exist among Eritreans and Eritreanist scholars, they are often protected from the gaze of potentially antagonistic outsiders. Many of these debates circulate informally and are not intended for broader consumption. Censorship and self-censorship are the hallmarks of Eritrean cultural intimacy, and even dispassionate observers feel pressure to shape their analyses accordingly. Authors who transgress the tacit rules may face harsh reactions from some Eritrean readers (and the ruling party) regardless of the analytic rigor or independent value of their scholarship (for example, Negash and Gebre 1986, Negash 1987, 1997; Tronvoll 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 1999).

Finally, a third approach respects the exigencies of cultural intimacy but deconstructs historical narratives themselves and/or critically addresses multiple interpretations and the tensions between them (Bernal 2000a, 2000b; Hepner 2000a, 2000b, 2003a, 2003b; Markakis 1987, 1988; Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001; Pool 2001; Sorenson 1992, 1993; Woldemikael 1993). This literature examines how and why different truth claims have emerged and changed over time, and with what consequences

for whom. Neither hostile to Eritrean nationalism nor beholden to it, this approach seeks to enrich our understanding of the Eritrean experience as an internally differentiated socio-cultural, political, and historical process still in the making.

Although the positions outlined above share more commonalities than differences, it is important to frame the field of Eritrean studies in such a way that those less familiar with the Horn region may approach its literature as informed observers and participants in an ongoing, multifaceted, and often contentious debate. For the uninitiated, Horn of Africa studies can be an especially bewildering arena.

A similar evaluation of the field could be offered for the Ethiopianist literature. Yet few, if any, accounts oriented towards Ethiopian nationalist interpretations (and here there are also several varieties) show much capacity for Eritrean claims. The border dividing Eritrea and Ethiopia has too frequently appeared impermeable to scholars of the Horn, who find its crossing perilous in often very concrete ways. This unfortunate fact has prevented many scholars from dialoguing effectively with one another or developing perspectives that may ameliorate, as opposed to aggravate, the real and imagined conflicts on the ground. The contentiousness of Ethiopian and Eritrean narratives -- discursive representations of these conflicts -- leads Matsuoka and Sorenson (2001:32) to sketch the apt metaphor of the Ethiopian-Eritrean region as a haunted house, in which “the domestic becomes terrifying, the familiar becomes strange, and the secret of what is inside becomes all-consuming. . . a place of ghosts and shadows, full of secrets and reversals, obsessions with the ancient past and anxieties about the future.”

Approaching modern Eritrean history therefore demands caution and more than a measure of respect for those who have been lost in its making. At the same time, writing or re-envisioning aspects of Eritrea’s contested past reminds us, in the words of Walter Benjamin (1968:256), that because “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” we must endeavor to brush history not against **one grain**, but against multiple grains at once. The recency of the nationalist struggle ha

made Eritrea's past thick with dusts not settled, even as the particles compete for the weight that will enable their sedimentation into the official story. While *reading* contemporary accounts of Eritrea's past, one must be attuned to the ways in which knowledge is situated (Haraway 1991), partial, and constitutive of projects of power (Foucault 1980). When *writing* such accounts the challenge becomes ever more intense. In the Horn of Africa, "where the present never seems to disentangle itself completely from the past" (Lewis 1983:1), sensitive scholars learn to tread carefully through both.

II. Approaches and Arguments

The historical account of Eritrea offered in Part I is a mindful analysis of current trends that interpret disputed aspects of the present in ways that illuminate rather than silence. I structure my account to speak to the major problems and themes addressed in this dissertation as a whole. Specifically, I probe the construction of Eritrean national identity both prior to the liberation struggle and throughout its duration to better understand contemporary trans/national power struggles within exile communities, between those communities and the Eritrean nation-state. In keeping with the critical anthropological tradition that "works in a positive way by expanding one's sense of human possibilities. . . . [and] seeks most fundamentally to remove, to lift away, the forms of consciousness, those partially self-imposed ideologies, that limit and deform people's lives" (Donham 1999:3), I am more interested in evoking questions about the Eritrean past and present than cementing specific answers. While I may risk offending multiple sensibilities with such an approach, I see greater value in challenging existing paradigms than reproducing them. At the same time, however, I am acutely aware of the high stakes faced by Eritrean people in portrayals of their past and present. I believe Eritreans and Eritreanist scholars will support my efforts towards critical analysis and recognize the empathetic spirit in which my study is written, even as my critical approach might generate some uneasiness.

Together, Chapters One and Two deal with three intertwined processes: the history of colonialism, occupation, and resistance, the nationalist revolution and its relationship to pre-existing historical and socio-cultural patterns, and the early significance of exile for nationalist identity and action. Part I thus offers an historical and socio-cultural background to modern Eritrea and the origins of nationalist consciousness; an analysis of how this consciousness was differentially configured, structured, and mobilized by the nationalisms of Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF); and how exile emerged as a fertile location for nationalist identity formation and revolutionary action.

Within this broad sketch, I emphasize certain trajectories and historical moments that provide keys to understanding Eritrea's present trans/national dilemmas. In Chapter One, I explore pre-nationalist Eritrean society and political economy, and the ways in which different identities articulated with one another and the consecutive periods of Italian, British, and Ethiopian rule. I then show how collective experiences of violence during the British Military Administration (BMA) and the Ethio-Eritrean Federation formed the basis for a common Eritrean identity among culturally diverse, politically fragmented populations. I also show how the reality of exile emerged out of local conditions of violence and repression, and how early exiles in Egypt and Sudan contributed to nationalist mobilization within Eritrea itself. All of these patterns form the foundation on which contemporary struggles over the constitution of a trans/national Eritrean state and society rest.

In Chapter Two, I examine the emergence of the ELF and EPLF and their different relationships as nationalist liberation movements to pre-nationalist identity patterns. I argue two closely related points: first, that the nationalism constructed by each front related differently to competing identities and socio-cultural patterns; and second, that each front developed a somewhat distinct form of nationalist identity that m

and recruits deeply internalized, thus linking national identity to either ELF or EPLF political identity.

These distinct forms, which can be characterized broadly as pluralist and singular nationalisms (Medina 1997), stemmed from the origins, structures, and ideologies at the front. The ELF's nationalist orientation was deeply embedded within pre-nationalist patterns (Pool 2001) and did not require its members to shed competing identities in the process of adopting an overarching nationalism, thus retaining a pluralist quality. In contrast, the EPLF consciously distanced itself from fragmented pre-nationalist identities and interests, neutralizing them through a homogenizing nationalism built largely on reconstructed ideas about class and multiethnicity. While EPLF's nationalism also embraced diverse sub-national identities, it did so by synthesizing them into a common national culture with distinctive internal characteristics. The rooting of different nationalisms in ELF or EPLF political identity continue to shape Eritrean socio-political relations at home and in exile, including current oppositional politics and other debates about democracy, civil society, citizenship, and national subjectivity. I ground my arguments in ethnographic illustrations of how nationalist identity was configured according to both common historical experience and different political identities, as regional, religious, ethnic, gendered, and generational ones. Understanding these related trends in Eritrea's past contextualizes the liberation struggle as an unfolding trans/national movement and helps ground our gaze before shifting it in Part II to the United States.

CHAPTER ONE

Colonialism, Resistance, and the Foundations of Nationalism: Eritrea to 1961

I. The Lay of the Land: Eritrea's Cultural Kaleidoscope

I. i. Geography and Ecology

On the coastal Horn of Africa, jutting heavenward from south to north with the last staggering peaks of the Great Rift, falling away to the salty moonlike deserts of the east and the fertile plains and colorless sands to the west, Eritrea sits a lonely wedge of rugged, embattled terrain. Positioned on the southern tip of the Red Sea coast, bordering Ethiopia to the south and southeast, Sudan to the west and north, and Djibouti at the southernmost tip, Eritrea shares with many other African countries a vastly diverse human and natural geography. Through the center of the country, the highlands, or *kebessa*, rise in a massive, mountainous ridge from the southern border town of Sen'afe to the edge of Sudan. From the central plateau towards the northern Sahel mountains, the *kebessa* is the most densely settled, rainy and temperate region of the country.

Surrounding the highlands on all sides are the lowlands, or *metahit*, of various climates and characters, with fertile plains to the west and southwest, and salty, harsh deserts to the northeast, east, and southeast. Until its recent re-zoning into administrative units, Eritrea consisted of nine provinces: Akele Guzai, Barka, Denkel, Gash-Setit, Hamasien, Sahel, Semhar, Senhit, and Seraye. These names are still commonly used by Eritreans and will also be used throughout this work, although the government's efforts to re-zone have been an important feature of nation-building.

Together with the *kebessa*, the *metahit* form four distinct and disparate ecological zones. The *kebessa* consists of two parts: the central plateau, which includes the

provinces of Akele Guzai, Hamasien, and Seraye, and where the capital city of Asmara is located (in Hamasien); and the rocky northern highlands of Sahel and parts of Senhit provinces. The *metahit* regions consist of the coastal Red Sea plain and the western lowlands. The coastal plain, which includes Semhar, eastern Sahel, and Denkel provinces and the major port cities of Massawa and Assab, sustains desert-like conditions and some of the hottest temperatures on earth. The central area of the coast, south from Massawa to the Gulf of Zula, however, remains more fertile and heavily populated compared to the northern and southern areas. The vast western lowlands include Barka and Gash-Setit provinces, and are dominated by dry brushland to the north. To the south, quenched by waters from the Barka, Mereb/Gash, and Setit rivers, the land is fertile for both agriculture and grazing, especially around the towns of Barentu and Tessenei. Somewhat anomalous in the highland-lowland scheme is the province of Senhit, to the east of the highland ridge, where the multi-ethnic market city of Keren is located, forming a kind of meeting place for the *kebessa* and eastern *metahit*.

I. ii. Populations

Although an official census has not been conducted since independence, Eritrea's population is currently estimated at about 3.8 million people, with over one million of those residing outside the country.¹ The geographic division of the country into highlands and lowlands roughly correspond to differences in ethno-linguistic identity, religion, and mode of production, with the *kebessa* characterized by sedentary, Christian farming communities and the *metahit* by Muslim, agro-pastoralist and nomadic ones. However, Eritrea's nine distinct ethno-linguistic groups have a long history of intermixing through commerce and marriage, conquest, religious conversions, and the purposeful political

¹ As part of its April 1992 Proclamation on Citizenship, the Eritrean government has recognized all Eritreans living or born outside the country to at least one Eritrean parent as citizens of the country. It also allows citizenship for those married to Eritreans and the naturalization of residents with other nationalities.

efforts of the more recent past. All of these have contributed to greater fluidity than to like ethnicity imply (see Woldemikael 1993:182-183).

The Tigrinya and Tigre ethno-linguistic groups together make up about 80% of the total population. While retaining distinctive languages and cultural traits, they have nonetheless adopted many from one another. Most Tigrinya people are Christian, with the exception of a Muslim minority called the Jiberti, while most Tigre practice Islam (with the exception of smaller clan groups, like the Christianized Mensa', for example). The Tigrinya are concentrated in Akele Guzai, Hamasien, and Seraye provinces. Tigre occupy much larger areas of the country, from the northern highlands and the central plateau to the regions around Keren, and west towards Sudan. The next largest groups are the Sene and Bilen, who profess both Islam and Christianity, and tend to reside in Senhit and Semhar provinces, from Keren towards the Red Sea coast. The Afar and Kunama each make up only about 3% of the total population, with the former occupying the Denke desert and areas around Assab on the coast and exclusively practicing Islam. The Kunama live in the southwest region of the country, near both the Ethiopian and Sudanese borders and practice Islam, Christianity, and traditional religions. The Kunama are notable in Eritrea for both their matrilineality and their historic resistance to the independence movement.² Finally, the smaller groups of the Rashaida, Nara, and Hedareb each have around 1% of the total population and practice Islam almost exclusively. The Rashaida trace their descent to 19th century Saudi Arabian migrants and reside on the northern Red Sea coast. The Nara live in proximity to the Kunama, with whom they share some historical tensions, while the Hedareb mostly reside in the far western edge of Eritrea, along the Sudanese border.

² Kunama resistance to nationalism was largely related to historic tensions they shared with groups like the Nara, from whom many early guerrilla fighters were drawn. As Chapter Two examines, these early fighters reproduced some important local tensions, leading the Kunama to seek protection from Ethiopian authorities and resist the liberation struggle (see Markakis 1987).

The fluidity of these ethno-linguistic and regional distinctions must again be emphasized; with few exceptions most Eritreans speak several languages and many claim members of different religious or ethno-linguistic groups in their families. Arabic, Tigre, and Tigrinya have become the major languages of communication, although most groups also maintain their own mother tongue, and language frequently expresses membership in a particular group more effectively than does an ethnic label. Similarly, both sedentary agriculturalists and nomadic pastoralists or agro-pastoralists have long migrated seasonally for grazing or commerce. It is therefore difficult to offer a firmly-drawn portrait of Eritrea's human geography. Not only do these internal dynamics upset whatever neatly corresponding traits we may wish to impose, but so have successive administrative structures like the Italian colonial project, the revolutionary fronts, and now the independent Eritrean state, all of which implemented policies that shifted pre-existing relationships within and between groups and the regions they occupied. However, Eritreans themselves are usually quite adept at recognizing various markers, and still draw upon regionalist logic in particular. This despite the fact that the EPLF, and now the Eritrean government, have discouraged such sub-national identifiers.

Kinship and clan structures have enhanced the fluidity of ethno-linguistic, regional, and religious distinctions, often subdividing groups into smaller units and recombining them again into confederations. Clan membership is not static and has changed over time in response to various political and economic conditions. Structurally prevalent among the Tigre population in particular, the largest clans include the Beni 'Amer, the Marya, and Bet Asgede, and the largely Protestant Mensa'. As we will see later, these clan groups and the Tigre people overall, have been extremely important to the early foundations of nationalist identity and the Eritrean Liberation Front in particular.

Eritrea remains an overwhelmingly rural society; 80% of its population lives outside of urban areas. However, the major cities of Asmara, Keren, Massawa, and Assab are important centers of cultural admixture and administrative power. Some tensions exist

between urban and rural dwellers, especially since independence and the overwhelming presence of visiting exiles from all over the globe who tend to reflect both urban and Western predilections. The influx of international ideas, cosmopolitan tastes, and foreign currency has given rise to powerful, striking juxtapositions of tradition and modernity, wealth and poverty, globalism and provincialism. In turn, new arrangements reveal yet another viscous layer of identities, interests, and power relations superimposed upon existing pre-and post-nationalist patterns, themselves also in constant transition. While it is important to understand the way things were in Eritrea's past in order to understand the present, we must always keep in mind a transformative dynamism at the heart of all social, cultural, and political developments over time.

II. Fluidity and Fixity: Pre-Nationalist Eritrean Society

It is almost obligatory in any historical account of Eritrea to begin with a few statements about its strategic position on the Red Sea Coast and the multitude of foreign interests it attracted. Parts of the region now known as Eritrea were at different times subject to the invasion and rule of various groups, from the Sudanese Funj dynasty in the western lowlands (c.1580-1821) and the Ottoman Turks dominating the coastal and lowland regions (1557-1865), to the Egyptians who succeeded them both (1813 -1823 and 1865-1885), and later the Italian colonial regime (1890-1941).³ Contemporary national accounts often trace the origins of modern nationalism to these periods of foreign occupation by suggesting that Eritrea was always, in some way or another, distinct from Ethiopia. In any event, the *long duree* shows that the region now known as Eritrea was part of much larger trade circuits, migrations, and overlapping imperial expansions and contractions that began as early as 2500 BCE.⁴ These migrations and imperial ventures

³ Killion (1998:175-178; 413-414) points out that although the Ottoman and Egyptian incursions beginning in the 1500s are usually treated as separate phenomena, they were actually more like a single process with different phases.

⁴ See, for example, Killion's (1998) very detailed "Chronology of Eritrean History" as well as Marcus's

clearly shaped regions of modern-day Eritrea in distinct ways. As Pool (2001), Killion (1998), and Woldemikael (1993) indicate, we can trace the pattern of Christian-dominated, agricultural highlands and Muslim-dominated, pastoralist lowlands, as well as certain features of regional, ethnic, religious, and clan identities, to these connections with external empires and groups.

Insulated by northern Ethiopian rulers from the expansion of the Ottomans and Egyptians into the highlands in the mid-1800s, the Eritrean *kebessa* became more tightly integrated into the expanding Ethiopian empire. The lowlands to the east and north remained under Ottoman-Egyptian influence, while the western lowlands retained a kind of fluid relationship with Sudanese Beja populations and localized Islamic administrative mechanisms (see Pool 2001; Killion 1998; Trimmingham 1965). By the advent of formal Italian colonialism in 1890, the Eritrean *kebessa* was integrated into the Ethiopian empire-state.

The Orthodox Church played an important role in the deepening cultural and political interdependency between the emerging center of the Ethiopian empire-state and its northernmost reaches. Tronvoll (1998a) shows how in rural, highland communities land ownership and distribution, calendrical notions of time, and community membership based on patrilineage were all structured by the Orthodox Church and enforced through its rites and beliefs. Similarly, Pool (2001) demonstrates that highland communities became integrated into the Ethiopian empire-state by the collective payment of tribute and tax, organized through the Church, which was built, financed, and maintained by wealthy landowning villagers whose names were inscribed upon the Tabot, or representational Ark of the Covenant. Many priests were drawn from these wealthier families and played multiple roles as power-brokers, teachers, healers, and community leaders. Thus, land tenure, social privilege or class differences, and political power were all linked to religion

(1994) more narrative account.

and the structure of the Orthodox Church. As the Church became more closely aligned with the Ethiopian imperial center, these communities were likewise drawn into the empire-state's sphere of cultural and political influence.

At the same time, however, communities within regions, and regions as groupings of communities, retained distinctive identities according to the particular lineages inhabiting the land over many generations. Nadel (1946:67) observed in the 1940s that "To the people of Eritrea at large, the three Plateau Divisions, Hamasien, Akele-Guzai, and Serai, are different 'countries' in the true sense of the word, with different history, different character, even different customs, and the people of different Divisions are conscious of those differences almost as one is conscious of a different nationality" (see also Tronvoll 1998a:30). Thus, regional identities, closely interwoven with land, kinship, and religion, remained very important markers of local belonging. Even in contemporary Eritrea it is common to use the term '*adi*, meaning village, to inquire about one another's familial roots as well as the national origin of non-Eritreans. The term connotes, simultaneously, membership in a relatively small, territorially and patrilineally-embedded community, as well as in the larger abstraction of a nation-state, with the direct meaning varying according to context.

Among contemporary urban-dwelling Asmarinos the logic of '*adi* also retains its importance. Each person roots him or herself within a particular village from whence one's forefathers came and where it is still possible for many to claim land, but community identities also coalesce around particular neighborhoods of the city, each of which has its own Orthodox Church (as well as a mosque and perhaps other denominational churches). Just as rural Orthodox communities each celebrated *negdet*, or the feast-day of the patron saint, so too do the Orthodox in many Asmara neighborhoods claim a particular saint for their community and celebrate *negdet*. Similarly, many Protestants link their religious identity to a particular neighborhood of Asmara called *geza kenesha*, literally "house of Protestantism." Thus, although urban identities are today only partially rooted in rural

to land, the underlying pattern of regional and religious affiliation is also subtly transposed onto the urban landscape. In contemporary rural highland areas, as Tronvoll (1998a) discovered, these dense, interlocking patterns of regional, community, kinship, class, and religious belonging remain strong despite other uneven transformations introduced by successive administrative structures, nationalism, and revolution.

These patterns therefore emerged in pre-colonial Eritrea as the Orthodox Church gradually became the strongest link between northern highland communities and the Ethiopian imperial center. For turn of the century highland communities, as Marcus (1994) also explores in detail, the Church was, in fact and *de facto*, the State. Over time, this collusion increased the cultural, political, and religious dominance of highland Christian peoples throughout the Ethiopian Empire.

Yet, the Muslim-dominated lowlands remained aloof and peripheral to the empire's influence and dominant cultural identity, producing a kind of anxiety among Christians who imagined themselves an island surrounded by a vast and uncontrolled sea of Islam (Trimingham 1965). The regional, economic, and religious division of the empire into sedentary, highland Orthodox Christians and pastoralist, lowland Muslims (and animists) came to characterize both modern Ethiopia and its northern province of Eritrea. But, as indicated earlier, it is important to keep in mind that these distinctions remained more fluid than such descriptions suggest, especially as administrative structures changed. Pool (2001) and Markakis (1987, 1988) point out that grievances between regional, kin, ethno-linguistic, and/or religious groups, even when expressed in terms of one or more identities, were usually about unequal access to resources and different experiences of colonization rather than reified identities themselves. Moreover, intermixing, conversions, and political movements have also upset whatever pre-colonial homologies early observers like Longrigg (1945), Nadel (1946), and later Trevaskis (1960) identified between region, ethnicity, and religion.

Thus, despite marked fluidity on the ground, for many generations the highland-Christian and lowland-Muslim divide dominated perceptions of the local landscape and structured important socio-cultural and economic patterns, as well as early nationalism. And as pointed out above, the legacy of such identifications lingers today in multiple ways. This tension between fixity and fluidity among and between Eritrean populations suggests that the policies of colonial administrators and the “ethnological thinking” of anthropologists and historians (Amselle 1998) have combined with internal socio-political dynamics to harden discursive identity constellations in Eritrea even as actual practices contradict or resist categorization. Most importantly for our task here is the way in which the respective nationalisms of ELF and EPLF related to, altered, and entrenched this tension between fluidity and fixity of identities. We will return to this point later.

In the lowlands, identities and the relationship between territory, kin groups, and ethnic belonging were configured quite differently than in the highlands, although religion was deeply implicated there as well. Among the various ethno-linguistic groups of the lowland regions, pre-colonial distinctions rested largely on differences in forms of Islam and property/class relationships. Clan membership and ethnic identity in the way we tend to imagine it today were much more flexible than in the highlands. Pool (2001) analyzes how Tigre people of the western and northeastern lowlands, as well as parts of the northern highlands, were divided into two castes, with the *tigre*, or serfs, paying tribute to the *shumagalle*, or elders.⁵ Among the Beni ‘Amer clans of the western lowlands, complex sub-clan identities intersected with a master-serf kind of class structure in which certain lineages paid taxes to sub-chiefs, who paid taxes to clan chiefs who paid in turn to other supra-clan chiefs. However, partly due to the pastoralist mode of production, shifting populations tended to segment into more and more complexly-linked

⁵ This section relies heavily on Pool’s (2001) analysis, in part because he has done a finer job outlining these complexities than perhaps any other author to date.

groupings of clans, rather than coalesce into structured, ethno-political units (Nadel 1946:60). Islam gradually emerged as the main unifying identity, and by the 1940s *shari'a* law provided some kind of loosely coherent structure for many of these populations.

However, these same migrations and fragmentations also resulted in different forms of Islam and corresponding administrative structures. In the 1800s, religious orders drawn from particular kin groups, like the Mirghani family of the Khatmiyya *tariqa* and the Add Shaykh, who traced their descent to Sheik Al-Amin ibn Hamad, became important mediators in conflicts over resources between clans and clan confederacies. Clerics used their knowledge of Islam to help shape more common beliefs and practices among their diverse followers. Eventually the Add Shaykh split into further groupings which attached themselves to other already existing clan or ethno-linguistic groups, like the Beni 'Amer. The followers of the Mirghani Khatmiyya retained fluidity across the Sudanese border, and eventually gathered together many other fragmented Muslim communities of different backgrounds throughout the western Eritrean lowlands. Again using Islam to establish social norms and practices, the multi-ethnic *tariqas* became important administrative structures through which the Italian colonial state and later the British Military Administration exacted taxes and exerted some sort of power and authority. All of these features became much more important in the 1940s when early nationalism first emerged among Muslim lowland populations, articulated through Islam but based upon class grievances that had been aggravated by colonial administrations.

In the *kebessa*, already conjoined to the Ethiopian empire-state through the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church intervened and helped prime Eritrea for Italian colonial rule. Catholic missionaries had been present in Ethiopia since the 1500s but attracted more resistance than converts. In 1632, they were expelled by Emperor Fasilidas for their role in civil strife between Catholic converts and local Orthodox adherents. The strife originated with Fasilidas's father Emperor Susneyos, himself a

Catholic convert, who had for a short period taken away the Orthodox Church's authority in the state and angered it by appointing an anti-Orthodox Catholic Bishop (Marcus 1994:40; Killion 1998:132). Taking refuge in Eritrea, the early missionaries were then deported by the occupying Ottoman Turks. Those who returned or arrived later were executed by Ethiopian rulers.

In 1837, Jesuit and Lazarist missionaries finally succeeded in establishing themselves and converting local Orthodox, particularly in the centrally-located Akele Guzai and Senhit regions. By the time the Italian colonial structure was firmly in place, two distinct Catholic orientations had evolved. One, an indigenized form developed by the Lazarists who adapted Catholic liturgy to the Orthodox Alexandrine Rite, and the other comprised of Italian colonists and Italo-Eritreans who followed the Latin Rite (see Killion 1998:132-134). Initially empowered by the colonial state, the Catholic Church continued to amass wealth and property throughout Eritrea; by 1950, it claimed 35,000 followers and ran orphanages, clinics, and schools (including the University of Asmara). However, tensions endured with the Orthodox Church, which remained tightly linked to the Ethiopian monarchy, and with the Swedish Evangelical Mission (founded in 1863), which vied with the Catholics for converts among the Orthodox, and to a lesser extent, Muslims.⁶

III. Changing Colonialisms: Italy, Britain, Ethiopia

III. i. Italy, 1869-1941

Italian presence in Eritrea predated formal colonization by several decades, when, following the Berlin Conference of 1844-1845, Ethiopia drew the covetous eye of several

⁶ The Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) was expelled by Italian colonial authorities in 1935 but returned again in 1941 to establish a firm Protestant presence. Contemporary Eritrean Protestants, especially Lutherans and self-styled ecumenical evangelicals (Pentecostals) trace their roots to the SEM. The SEM also had considerable success converting Tigre Muslims of the Mensa' clan to Protestantism.

European powers. In competition with British and French interests in the Horn, Italy managed to purchase the Eritrean port of Assab in 1869. Using Assab as a foothold, the rest of Eritrea, and ultimately Eritrea as a foothold for Ethiopia, Italy occupied the famine-stricken *kebessa* in 1889 and declared its colony on January 1, 1890. It named the region “Eritrea” after the Greek word for Red Sea (*Erythraeum*), thus replacing the former appellation, “Mereb Mellash,” Amharic for “the land beyond the Mereb River” (see Haile 1986). Originally slating Eritrea as a resettlement location for dispossessed southern Italians, ex-convicts, and other undesirable elements, Italy soon turned additional attention towards mining. When Eritrea’s natural deposits proved to be poorer than expected, the colony instead became a reservoir for native soldiers, or *askari*, who were recruited into Italian fighting forces as they prepared to invade Ethiopia (Negash 1987).⁷

As Italy continued to settle and develop its colony, it altered traditional land tenure systems and power relations throughout the *kebessa*. As in other African colonial contexts, the simultaneous projects of land expropriation and the introduction of an industrializing wage-labor economy resulted in internal migrations and urbanization. With Mussolini’s rise to power, Italy began using its small Red Sea colony to generate metropolitan wealth and power as well as to plot further colonial endeavors. From 1936 to 1941 it implemented a segregated social system in which Eritreans were permitted minimal education and skills and were excluded from the colonial administration.⁷ These segregationist policies helped unite highland populations in common resentment toward fascist rule (Gruber and Garcetti 2000:4; see also Negash 1987) although it did not generate a strong, common Eritrean identity. During the war-boom economy of World War II, Asmara became a thriving, industrialized center of production and commerce.

⁷ Italy’s colonial incursions were repulsed by Ethiopia at the famous 1896 Battle of Adwa, where Italian forces and Eritrean *askaris* suffered a spectacular defeat.

While the Italian colonial impact was not limited to the *kebessa*, it did affect the highland regions more extensively than the lowlands (Murtaza 1998). However, the changes introduced in the lowlands were also significant for the later appearance of pro-independence nationalism. Lowland groups like the Beni ‘Amer clan of the Tigre and the Bilien had long suffered invasions from northern Ethiopian Tigrayan forces with the expansion of the Ethiopian empire-state into their territories. Moreover, the Sudanese Mahdiyya had also launched incursions into the western lowlands, creating problems for both local populations and the securing of colonial borders. Other groups antagonized one another, such as the Muslim Nara who repeatedly raided the animist Kunama. The Italian colonial state’s intervention in many cases alleviated tensions for lowlanders and offered them protection (Killian 1998:270; Negash 1987; Trevaskis 1960). At the same time, the development of plantation agriculture displaced or confined nomadic and agro-pastoralists, disrupting their relationship with the land while providing fewer alternatives than what was available in the highlands.

Most importantly in terms of lowland identities, solidarities, and power structures, however, the Italian administration instituted a system of indirect rule in which local chiefs were replaced or empowered as salaried officials and traditional master-serf class structures were entrenched as methods for exacting taxes. At the same time, the Islamic institutions that had unified fragmented groups received support from the Italian regime as a way of controlling and administering unwieldy, peripatetic, and often hostile populations (Pool 2001).

Thus, the superimposition of colonial policies on pre-colonial structures both reproduced certain aspects of those structures while simultaneously altering others (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Comaroff 1985; Gledhill 1994). This was true in both the *kebessa* and *metahit*, although the highlands underwent additional urbanization and industrialization not seen in the lowlands. Massive infrastructural changes, such as the building of a railroad, gondola, and road transport system throughout the country also

paved the way for increased integration in the postcolonial and revolutionary national periods. All of these dynamics played a role in the awakening of nationalist sentiment and its spread from the lowlands to the highlands in the late 1950s and 1960s.

III. ii. British Military Administration, 1941-1952

Italy's colonization of Eritrea ended in 1941 amidst failed attempts to maintain its occupation of Ethiopia (1935-1941) and the demise of Mussolini's Fascist regime. Succeeded by the British Military Administration (BMA, 1941-1952), Italian colonial rule did more to separate and distinguish Eritrea from Ethiopia than any other foreign power in its history. But the BMA years introduced further changes, especially on the socio-political front, by dismantling Italy's segregationist system, nurturing the consciousness and development of an indigenous intelligentsia and working class, and encouraging political parties, labor unions, and civic associations. As the economy collapsed in the years following WWII, these unions and parties enjoyed immense popularity among expanding but economically-depressed urban populations.

Beginning in 1946, political organizing took center stage as Eritreans prepared to influence several international commissions charged with the disposition of Italy's former colony. The first commission arrived in 1948 and returned from Eritrea, unable to make a suitable recommendation due to the fragmentation of opinion it found among the local population. In 1950, the United Nations sent another commission, which determined that Eritrea should be federated to Ethiopia as an autonomous unit. The commission recognized, on the one hand, that post-Italian Eritrean no longer fit well into traditional Ethiopia (Marcus 1994:158). On the other, however, it did not display characteristics necessary for a viable state.

Within Eritrea, two main parties emerged in the 1946-1952 period and agitated the UN vis-à-vis the UN Commission. The Unionist Party (founded in 1947) consisted largely of highland Christians who supported reunification with Ethiopia, and the Independence

Bloc was a coalition of several parties headed by Sheik Ibrahim Sultan. Founded in 1949, the Independence Bloc's following was mainly Muslim but claimed some progressive Christian labor organizers, including Woldeab Woldemariam, the famed "Fathers of Eritrean nationalism."

Much of the labor organizing and multi-party activities were limited to urban areas (including Massawa) and the Christian *kebessa*. In the *metahit*, or lowlands, Muslims remained peripheral to Eritrean power structures and dominant cultural definitions, despite comprising half the total population of Eritrea. As Eritrea's postcolonial future was debated in the United Nations and the imperial regime in Addis Ababa petitioned for its return to the Ethiopian state, a simmering hostility to *kebessa* domination erupted into calls for Eritrean independence among Muslim popular classes, or serfs. This hostility also extended towards Eritrean highlanders whose cultural identities and religio-political allegiances tended towards reunification with Ethiopia, as expressed in the powerful Unionist Party. Indeed, all Christian highlanders were viewed by early Muslim nationalists as suspect on the basis of region, religion, and historical continuity with highland Ethiopia.

Beginning in the mid-1940s, Ibrahim Sultan emerged as an important leader among Bilien and Tigre serfs around the city of Keren in Senhit province. Drawing upon existing hostility towards the *kebessa* and the Unionist Party in particular, Sultan articulated an important connection between lowland class struggles and highland, Ethiopian domination. He pointed out that traditional lowland elites would likely secure their own kin and class power through taxation if Eritrea returned to Ethiopian rule. Working with the British political officer in Keren, Sultan undertook a massive reconstruction of fragmented lowland serf populations and literally created 28 new "tribes" that were intended to reflect pre-colonial patterns as well as the egalitarian principles of a unifying Islamic identity (Pool 2001:46). This move highlights the

malleability of kinship and ethnicity, as well as how class inequalities and customary conflicted with the tenets of Islam.

However, Eritrean politics in the BMA period were still largely viewed as a highland Christian versus lowland Muslim struggle, obscuring important power dynamics within those diverse groups. By 1947, the sectarianism of political organizing led Trevaskis (1960:76) to claim that Eritreans “stood divided against one another in opposing Moslem and Christian factions.” However, other evidence from the period suggests a more complex picture, with many Muslim elites favoring union with Ethiopia as a way to preserve their own privilege, and many Christian urbanites opposing a return to Ethiopian rule on the basis of their colonial experience and frustrated aspirations. It is a problematic leap to assert that political positions during the BMA administration neatly corresponded to religion, region, or ethnicity, and the developments of the subsequent Ethio-Eritrean Federation bear this out. As Pool (2001:43-47) shows, the serf rebellions among lowland Muslims were central to the spread of early nationalism amongst popular classes. And while the conservative Orthodox Church helped delay its rise in the *kebele* system, Christians remained oriented towards Ethiopia more for political-economic reasons than simply sectarian religious identity and a corresponding fear of Islam. It is perhaps more accurate to simply note that the decade of 1940s introduced, above all else, the radical politicization of Eritrean categorical identities (Erich 1983), both fluid and fixed, that took more definite shape in the Federation period, and finally reached a crisis point with the Eritrean liberation struggle in the late 1960s.

III. iii. The Ethio-Eritrean Federation, 1952-1962

The Ethio-Eritrean Federation was a critical juncture in both Eritrean and Ethiopian history and still evokes heated debate. Many contemporary Eritrean nationalists view the BMA as responsible for engendering sectarian, religiously-infused politics that contributed to the failure of Federation and later problems in the Eritrean Liberation

(see Pool 2001: 37). Other observers have emphasized the role of religious identities themselves (Negash 1997) or class relations (Gebremedhin 1989) as the main mechanisms behind the fragmented allegiances of the period. By any account, the Federation marks nationalism's first emergence amid chaotic and sometimes violently fractious politics which themselves reflected existing and evolving rifts in Eritrean society. The period remains key to understanding how pro-independence nationalism emerged in the context of competing, contradictory, and densely interlocking socio-cultural identities and class relations, including both pre-colonial patterns and those altered by the Italian and British administrations.

Following the visit of the United Nations commission in 1950 and a period of debate over various proposals for Eritrea's future, including splitting the territory between Sudan and Ethiopia according to its regional and religious geography, the UN federated Eritrea to Ethiopia in December 1952 as an autonomous unit. The terms of Eritrean autonomy included a separate Constitution, drafted by a UN commissioner; a democratically-elected Assembly;⁸ an independent judiciary; and a Chief Executive responsible for various departments, including education, finance, health services, and police.

However, as Ruth Iyob (1995:82) notes, the Ethiopian imperial monarchy's agreement to the Federation rested partly on its confidence in controlling Eritrean leaders and influencing "the production of policies beneficial to the empire." Indeed, Emperor Haile Selassie immediately set to work, together with his imperial representative in Eritrea, Andergatchew Messay, and the Eritrean Chief Executive, Tedla Bairu (also the leader of the pro-Ethiopia Unionist Party who later converted to pro-independence nationalism), to begin dismantling the structures designed to guarantee Eritrea's autonomy. Together they implemented policies that helped Ethiopia gain control of

⁸ Women and Italo-Eritreans of mixed parentage were denied suffrage or the right to hold elected office (see Iyob 1995:86).

Eritrea's economic and military capacities and crippled the ability of the Eritrean Assembly to represent the full spectrum of Eritrean politics by manipulating powerful members who favored reunification with Ethiopia.

Building on developments during the BMA, two major contenders emerged from the fray. The first was the Eritrean Democratic Front (EDF), a coalition reorganized out of the former Independence Bloc. The EDF included an array of political currents, from pro-independence parties like the Muslim League, to the Liberal Progressive Party (Woldeab Woldemariam's group), and the Italo-Eritrean Association. The second was the Unionist Party (UP) which had reconfigured itself as a coalition that included both Muslim and Christian parties united in their support of reunification with Ethiopia. The UP received financial support from the Ethiopian imperial regime as well as strong backing from the Orthodox Church, which threatened to excommunicate pro-independence Christians (Iyob 1995:85). Both the EDF and UP represented diverse cross-sections of Eritrea's populations, although were not free of internal tension based upon differences in politics, language, religion, culture, and colonial experience among their constituents.⁹

The BMA years and the activities leading up to the Federation agreement invigorated the Eritrean political landscape, as explored in the previous section. It also introduced the use of political violence, as *shiftas*, or roving gangs, created disturbances in Asmara and in parts of Akele Guzai, Seraye, the Massawa coast, and the western lowlands to intimidate, harass, or kill leaders and civilians according to clashing political

⁹ The Unionist Party formed out of an earlier party called the *Mahaber Fiqri Hager* (MFH), or Party for the Love of Country, which accommodated a broad spectrum of Tigrinya-speaking Christians who felt historical and cultural kinship with Ethiopia. After 1946 the MFH was co-opted by more extreme pro-unionists after Woldeab Woldemariam failed to mediate the party's internal conflicts in the process of facilitating overall reconciliation among Eritrea's diverse and politicized populations at the Wa'la Bet Giorgis conference in November 1946. This dramatic shift to a pro-Ethiopia fundamentalism became the core of the Unionist Party during Federation, officially registered under that name in January 1947 (see Killion 1998:418). However, the party by then had expanded beyond its highland Christian base to include Muslim elites who favored reunification.

objectives (Iyob 1995:78). Assassinations were attempted on politicians perceived as dangerous to the Ethiopian regime. Highland civilians felt threatened by the Orthodox Church and Ethiopian law enforcement, while in the lowlands, class struggles among Muslims became linked to pro-independence, anti-*kebessa* sentiment.

Indeed, the political struggles that characterized the latter BMA years and the Federation highlighted existing and evolving rifts along religious, ethno-linguistic, regional, and class lines in particular. However, those lines proved to be porous and dynamic, thwarting the development of firm and durable alliances and contributing to the confused and hostile environment. At the same time, the Federation period also marked the beginning of a sense of common Eritrean identity and dramatically influenced the generation who went on to lay the foundations of the armed struggle for independence (Killion 1998:316; Iyob 1995:96).

While some scholars have viewed the Federation period's bitter politics as largely religious in nature (Negash 1997), others have attributed its ultimate failure to Ethiopian machinations (Ellingson 1986; Iyob 1995; Trevaskis 1960; Yohannes 1991). Still others have provided more nuanced analyses that account for the ways in which Eritreans, and particularly those in the Unionist Party, played instrumental roles in dismantling Eritrea's autonomy and facilitating its ultimate annexation by Ethiopia (Killion 1985; Pool 2001; Sishagne 1992). These accounts tend to take more seriously the complex interplay between class, religious, and regional interests that influenced actors from different locations of Eritrean society to favor union with Ethiopia. For example, Pool (2001) shows how class relations among Muslim lowlanders shaped a divisive politics in which emancipated serfs, reorganized into new clan groupings, supported independence while their former masters favored reunification with Ethiopia as a way to secure their diminishing power and privilege.

By the mid-1950s, the Ethiopian regime had succeeded in drastically reducing the efficacy of the Eritrean Constitution, and thus Eritrean autonomy, by drawing upon

powerful members of the Eritrean Assembly affiliated with the Unionist Party. Working in tandem with the imperial regime and its representatives in Eritrea, UP members of the Assembly undertook a series of policy changes designed to weaken the Constitution and deepen Eritrea's dependency on Ethiopia. Assembly members hostile to Ethiopia, such as Ibrahim Sultan, faced threats or arrest for assorted "violations" of Ethiopian law. As more Ethiopians were brought into the Eritrean administration and those who favored independence were pushed out, silenced, or arrested, a process of what Ruth Iyob (1995:90) calls Ethiopianization or "Amharization" transpired. This included the adoption of the Amharic language in place of Tigrinya and Arabic, as well as a particular valuation of the common highland, Christian culture and history shared by segments of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The erosion of the Federation also aggravated delicate trust between Muslims and Christians of different regions, despite the fact that politics did not divide cleanly according to religion. In 1958, a group of eighteen Muslims within the Eritrean Assembly, some of whom favored reunification with Ethiopia, petitioned the UN in protest of the violations perpetrated against the Eritrean Constitution by Ethiopians and pro-Ethiopian Unionists. They all agreed that the terms of Federation outlined by the UN in Resolution 390A had been violated. The Ethiopian imperial regime responded by jailing many of the petitioners and charging them with committing a crime against its federal jurisdiction. Muslims throughout Eritrea, regardless of their own political orientation, felt persecuted on the basis of religion because no Christian members of the Assembly had shown support for their Muslim colleagues or taken a similar position on the violation of the Federation agreement (Iyob 1995:90-91).

But while many Christians continued to favor union with Ethiopia, in part out of fear of violence or excommunication, other important figures like Woldeab Woldemariam, himself a highland Christian, remained staunchly anti-unionist. He was also targeted by the Ethiopian imperial regime, and suffered seven attempts on his life in

the space of six years. Nevertheless, he continued to rally other highland Christians and labor organizations, serving as the vice-Secretary General of the EDF. Woldeab finally went into exile in Cairo in 1953, where he continued his political activity with the hospitality of the Nasser regime in Egypt and remained a central figure in Eritrean nationalist politics through his Tigrinya-language radio broadcasts. His towering status in Eritrean history attests to his significance as an early Christian advocate of independence. He later clashed with Muslim exiles in Cairo who sought to articulate pro-independence nationalism within sectarian Islam and excluded him from the early Eritrean Liberation Front (see Saulsberry 2002).

Thus, even while religion and region were not accurate indicators of political persuasion during the Federation period, they frequently appeared as fault lines that prevented strong alliances or resulted in political shifts when other multi-religious solidarities broke down. As we shall see, Ethiopia exploited these dynamics to the fullest possible extent after 1962. Class relations, however, played a role in helping generate alliances between Muslim elites and Christians, even as they fractured many Muslim communities as serfs configured pro-independence sentiment in terms of class grievances and Islamic egalitarian principles. The conflation of Islam with nationalism in the 1950s deterred many Christians from adopting a pro-independence stance, although they also remained bound to Ethiopia through the political-economy of the Orthodox Church.

Clearly, to distill out the role of religion, class, region, or ethnicity and reduce Eritrean politics to a function of any one in particular would be misleading. Such a reduction would prevent us from seeing the changing complexities of local identities, hierarchies, and the malleability of those in the context of struggles for power. Moreover, I argue that this dialectical view is necessary for understanding how and why the ELF and EPLF generated distinct forms of nationalist identity that continue to impact Eritrean socio-political relationships today.

The failure of the Federation in many ways hinted at the future challenges nationalists would face as they tried to forge unity among Eritrea's diverse and shifting populations. Despite the intention of the Federation as a middle road between Eritrea's independence and its full reabsorption into Ethiopia, within "three years after the launching of the federal arrangement Eritrea was for all intents and purposes a part of Ethiopia" (Negash 1997:35). In both the elections of 1956 and 1960, more Unionist Party members took positions in the Eritrean Assembly while pro-independence leaders became ever more marginalized or went into exile. On November 14, 1962, as Ethiopian soldiers filled the streets of Asmara, the Assembly essentially voted itself out of existence and announced that the Ethio-Eritrean Federation was henceforth null and void. The following day, Ethiopia formally annexed Eritrea. But in the western lowlands, the armed struggle for liberation had already begun.

IV. Violence, Rebellion, and Displacement: Origins of Nationalist Sentiment

The socio-political developments of the BMA years and especially the Federation period frequently provoked public unrest and used violence to express dissent, restore order, or brutally intimidate people into silence or submission. These forms of unrest and violence occurred at various locations in Eritrean society with an array of consequences. As I will begin to show in this section, collective experiences of violence and displacement helped form the structural underpinnings of nationalist identity, primed people for its ideological claims, and facilitated its initial spread from the lowlands to the highlands (see also Hepner 2000a).

. On one level were the serf rebellions occurring in the lowland regions, signaling the birth of pro-independence nationalism and its early linkages with Islam. On another level was the violence used by the Ethiopian imperial regime and its allies in the Eritrean administration, either to repress public unrest or suppress dissent within the ostensibly democratic federation government. These tactics included successful and attempted

assassinations of important political leaders as well as bombings of rural areas and massacres of civilians. However, other more subtle forms of everyday or symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977) were also deployed, such as the Orthodox Church's threats to excommunicate any Christian opposing Ethiopian rule, the burning of Tigrinya-language schoolbooks following the introduction of Amharic, and the removal of the Eritrean flag. In the late 1950s, demonstrations launched by students and workers invited a vicious response from law enforcement and the Ethiopian government, even as they expressed outrage towards injustices perpetrated against civilians. And as the state's incivility mounted, political opponents and other displaced persons went into exile in neighboring countries like Sudan, Egypt, and even Ethiopia itself. From those locations, early pro-independence nationalists prepared to launch their own violent response: armed revolt against Ethiopian rule.

IV. i. Lowland Class Struggles

As touched upon in previous sections, pre-colonial lowland communities adopted different forms of Islam that both united and fractured existing and newly-created confederations and changed their kinship and ethnic composition. Pool (2001:44-45) shows how these dynamics related, in part, to the mixing of orthodox, legalistic Islam and more popular, egalitarian versions embraced by serfs as they responded to changing power relations precipitated by Italian colonialism and then British administration. Colonialism had indeed changed the economic conditions on which traditional serf-master tribute arrangements had been based (Gebremedhin 1989; Murtaza 1998) and presented new opportunities for serfs who migrated between the British-ruled Sudan to work in cotton production or joined the Italian army (Pool 2001:45). Furthermore, by insulating former enemies from one another and disempowering local elites, the colonial administration virtually negated the basis of the master-serf relationship, which offered protection from neighboring groups (Markakis 1987:59). As customary law both

conflicted and blended with orthodox *shari'a* law, the latter provided more outlets for serf classes to resist their own oppression according to the tenets of Islam. In some cases, “dissident serfs” abandoned their existing clan membership to join others based on allegiance to Islamic saints rather than tribute-exacting *shumagalle*.¹⁰ Thus, Islam had an leveling effect upon traditional lowland societies by providing serfs with both the consciousness of their own class oppression and the religious justification for its redress.

These developments were part of the impetus for Sheik Ibrahim Sultan’s reorganization of lowland communities into “pre-conquest tribes,” discussed earlier in this chapter. His efforts were a response to the changes wrought by colonialism and the entrenchment of Islam. They were also possessed of direct political motive, in that he hoped to rally the emancipated serfs behind his leadership in the Muslim League (which later spearheaded the Independence Bloc during the BMA years, and then joined the Eritrean Democratic Front during the Ethio-Eritrean Federation). During the clan reorganization, many cosmopolitan, urbanized followers of Sultan, themselves of serf background, became empowered as chiefs of the new multiethnic “tribes” (Pool 2001:46). In his efforts to expand the mass base of the pro-independence Muslim League, Sultan reworked ethnicity, clan membership, and class hierarchies all at once and justified them through Islam as the main reorganizing principle. In doing so, he linked anti-Ethiopian sentiment, class struggles, and Islam to pro-independence politics to create the earliest form of Eritrean nationalism. Later, the Tigrinya Muslim merchants of Asmara, the Jiberti, also backed Sultan and helped finance the Muslim League (Pool 2001:47).

These changes, although not necessarily violent in and of themselves, fueled the political fragmentation of the BMA and Federation years that later devolved into chaos and violence. Dispossessed Muslim elites joined with pro-Ethiopian Christian Unionists to support reunification with Ethiopia as a way of restoring the status quo ante, although

¹⁰ Citing Trevaskis (1960), Pool (2001:44) describes the defection of serfs from the Bet Asghede to the Add Shaykh.

as we have also seen, these Muslims often felt alienated on the basis of religion despite their class affiliations with Christian elites and the Ethiopian regime. Most importantly, however, these changes laid the foundation for nationalism among those emancipated serfs, former soldiers, students, and political leaders who subsequently created the Eritrean Liberation Front. It also embedded that nationalism within a particular constellation of religious, regional, and ethno-linguistic identities (Pool 2001). These realities in turn precipitated more intensive repression and violence from the Ethiopian imperial regime and aggravated internal strife between Muslims and Christians, as pro-Ethiopian propaganda framed the ELF as Arab-Islamic in nature. Later still, it structured the emergence of the EPLF and the ensuing civil war between the rival liberation fronts.

Related to transformations in the lowlands, including the class struggles between serfs and masters, was an increase in banditry among *shiftas*, roving gangs of armed outlaws. Although the *shiftas* cannot be considered a political movement, their heightened activity during the Federation years signaled generally escalating unrest and uncontrollability in the western lowlands in particular. Many of those involved in *shifita* activity during the Federation period had been soldiers for the Italian army or members of the Sudanese police force, and later became fighters with the Eritrean Liberation Front. It is no coincidence that Hamid Idris Awate, the *shifita* turned ELF fighter turned national hero, is credited with firing the first shot of the armed struggle in September, 1961.

IV. ii. State Violence and Public Dissent

The Ethiopian imperial regime often resorted to violence in Eritrea as a form of social control and self-preservation. While the intensity of the violence increased dramatically in the latter 1960s, its origins lie in both the BMA and Federation periods as the Ethiopian imperial regime sought to control, and then punish, increasingly unruly Eritrean subjects.

Ethiopian repressive tactics surfaced in Eritrea at the same time as political organizing under the BMA. As different parties formed in preparation for the UN decision on Eritrea's future, Ethiopian agents also began manipulating those elements who supported reunification, particularly inside the *Mahaber Fiqri Hager*, the progenitor of the Unionist Party. In summer 1946, Ethiopia's liaison officer, Colonel Nega Haile Sellassie, recruited unemployed, disaffected young men and organized them into the youth wing of the party. The group, known as *Andenet* (meaning "unity" in Amharic), soon became a kind of terror squad within the UP. Its regional chapters carried out terrorist attacks on pro-independence Eritreans, including several attempts on Woldeab Woldemariam's life. They also assassinated Abdulkadir Kebire, a founding member of both the *Mahaber Fiqri Hager* and the Muslim League (Killion 1998:73-74). *Andenet* was shut down by the BMA after Kebire's murder, although it continued to operate clandestinely and targeted Woldeab Woldemariam in particular. The name *Andenet* was used by Eritreans during and after the Federation period to describe any kind of organized pro-Ethiopian political violence (Killion 1998:73), signifying the extent of its power in Eritrean collective memory.¹¹

After the institution of the Federation in 1952, repression of Eritrean dissent or anti-unionist sentiment focused on the dismantling of the UN Resolution 390A, which had established the terms of the federal agreement, and the use of "intimidation, coercion, and military might" on citizens and politicians (Iyob 1995:89). In 1955, Ibrahim Sultan was put on trial for trumped-up charges that he had defamed a Sudanese official (Ibid.), a move that effectively silenced the strongest and most vocal proponent of independence in the Eritrean Assembly and eventually led to his exile. Three years later, several of the 18 members of the Assembly who petitioned the UN regarding the Federation agreement's

¹¹ Saulsberry (2002:247) also discusses an Ethiopian intelligence unit called *Mereb*, charged with spying on Eritrean nationalists, infiltrating organizations, and creating false nationalist groups to entrap rebels. Such groups contributed to the climate of fear, secrecy, and distrust that pervaded the Eritrean struggle and whose legacy remains in contemporary Eritrean political culture (see also Connell 1997:43; Iyob 1997).

violations were imprisoned. As the Federation's basis for Eritrean autonomy continued to erode and the local economy withered, students and workers in urban areas became especially restless. Fearful of recriminations, civilians had been limiting public dissent to more subtle, cultural expressions such as song lyrics or poems.¹² However, in 1958 workers and students took their dissent to the streets to launch the largest demonstrations and strikes in Eritrean history.

Although intended as a nationwide event, the general workers' strike of 1958 centered mostly in Asmara, with some workers in Keren and Massawa also participating out of solidarity (Killion 1997:30). On March 10, 1958, shops and businesses remained closed as workers gathered at Asmara's main Orthodox Church, Kidiste Mariam, swelling to 80,000 strong. As the strikers gathered to listen to speeches from labor leaders and show their opposition to the developments of the Federation, Unionist Party members of the Eritrean Assembly and police forces descended on the peaceful gathering to order its dispersal. A near-riot ensued, with police firing shots into the crowd, dispensing tear-gas, and chasing the fleeing workers. Several days later, the Asmara teachers' union also joined the workers on strike, precipitating further violence from the police. By the end, nine Eritrean civilians were dead, over 500 wounded, and more than 200 labor leaders and workers had been imprisoned. The labor movement and all public anti-Unionist organizations was effectively smashed (Killion 1997:32-33).

Students, however, were only just beginning their activism in the late 1950s. As Ammar (1997) shows, student unrest in Asmara related to a number of factors. In their immediate environment, students were responding to the increasing Ethiopianization of the educational system, including the introduction of more Ethiopian teachers and Amharic as the language of instruction. In other ways, however, they were also being influenced by anti-colonial discourses spreading across the African continent. The

¹² Ruth Iyob (1995:91) details one song in which Mussolini's rule is ironically deemed preferable to Ethiopia's.

students also heard about the activism of an Eritrean student association forming in Cairo, and listened to the Tigrinya-language radio broadcasts coming out of that same city, sponsored by Woldeab Woldemariam and a group called the Eritrean Liberation Movement (see Saulsberry 2002). All these factors incited them to action.

In 1957 several strikes took place at Asmara schools, including an uprising at Haile Sellassie I Secondary School in which students destroyed dormitories and other school property in response to the introduction of Amharic (Ammar 1997:66). Many students also participated in the 1958 general workers' strike. Both high school and university students later went on to stage further demonstrations around the country, the two largest of which took place in 1962 and 1965. As we shall see in Chapter Three especially, student activism was absolutely central to the Eritrean independence movement, especially among highland Christians and those living and studying abroad. Student activism helped recruit young people to the ELF and later the EPLF, and in exile locations, established the basis for the trans/nationalist revolution.

The repression endured by urban students and workers, however, nearly paled in comparison to that following the Federation's collapse in 1962 and the rise of the armed nationalist movement under the ELF. Beginning in the early 1960s, Emperor Haile Sellassie embarked on a campaign of blanket bombing and napalming rural areas, particularly in the lowland regions where ELF fighters were known to be active. Other genocidal tactics such as the poisoning of wells and the mass burning of villages were also deployed. Murtaza (1998:77) notes that in 1967, the Ethiopian army launched an attack in the western lowlands that killed 400 people and either destroyed or dispersed more than sixty thousand animals. That same year, nearly all the villages around Keren were leveled, and 86 more in the highland provinces of Akele Guzai and Seraye. Resettlement schemes forced rural communities off their lands and initiated massive refugee flows into Sudan, where by 1970 between 60,000 and 90,000 persons languished, most of them from the lowlands (Kibreab 1987:17, 1996; Murtaza 1998:77). The

widespread atrocities in the lowland areas in particular were intended to stem the growth of the movement. Indeed, at least one author has asserted that whereas Italian colonialism proved the major transformative moment for highland communities, violence perpetrated by the Ethiopian army disproportionately affected the lowlands and did more to destroy the local society and economy than 100 years of colonial rule (Murtaza 1998).

IV. iii. Symbolic Violence

In addition to overt repression and brutality, Eritreans were also subjected to more subtle forms of violence designed to chasten their emergent identity and reabsorb them into the Ethiopian nation. These included many features already mentioned, such as the Orthodox Church's threats of excommunication, the replacement of native languages of instruction with Amharic, the banning of spoken and written Tigrinya in public settings, the burning of Tigrinya language schoolbooks, and the lowering of the Eritrean flag. The omnipresent threat of violence, infiltration of Eritrean society by spies from the Ethiopian regime, and the public display of bodies cast a pall of fear, distrust, and secrecy over Eritrean society and especially in occupied Asmara. The use of violence as a tool of social control did not necessarily require overt acts: frequently, it's greatest power stemmed from the imminent possibility of its deployment at any time (see Bourdieu 1977; Gledhill 1994). Symbolic violence factored heavily into Eritrean individuals' decision to join the nationalist movement in various capacities, despite the increased risk of provocation. Dan Connell (1997:16-17) recalls an incident in an Asmara restaurant, when, in the wake of civilian deaths at the hands of the *afagne guad*, or Ethiopian death squad, a man leapt to his feet, shouting, "You don't save your life by staying out of the front! I might die tomorrow or next week! Why shouldn't I fight with the front? What are we doing sitting here while our brothers are dying all around us?"

As part of its symbolic power, the constant threat of violence induced many Eritreans to migrate to Ethiopia in search of more secure lives. The erosion of the Eritrean

economy and new educational programs instituted by Haile Sellasie also pushed Eritrean workers and students to go in search of better opportunities. Once in Ethiopia, they faced further symbolic violence through subtle and overt discrimination. Many were immediately perceived by Ethiopians as threats because of the rebellion emerging in Eritrea. But rapidly deteriorating labor conditions in Eritrea left many people no other choice, forcing thousands of Eritreans to Addis Ababa, where they eventually came to dominate the transport, construction and service sectors of the Ethiopian economy (Markakis 1987:118-119).¹³

While many features I have described as symbolic violence related to important structural shifts occurring within the Ethio-Eritrean Federation, especially the erosion of Eritrean symbols of autonomy and the physical absorption of Eritrean migrants into Ethiopian cities and towns, their impact on everyday Eritrean citizens was both diffuse and powerful. For women and men whose lives and identities were shaped by developments in the late Federation period and afterwards, memories of both real and symbolic violence continue to evoke strong emotions, looming larger and with greater immediacy than abstract historical events or facts. When Eritrean men and women go seeking the origins of their own national consciousness, many reach back to the violent years of the Federation and annexation during which they were intimidated, harassed, displaced, and dehumanized. The ways in which symbolic violence was experienced and the implications for individual and collective nationalist identity formation are explored more extensively in the following chapter.

¹³ The educational and economic success of Eritreans in Ethiopia earned them the epithet “Jews of Africa” and was implicated many years later in the deportation of more than 80,000 Eritreans out of Ethiopia during the 1998-2000 border war.

IV. iv. Displacement and Exile

For many Eritreans, flight into exile provided the best alternative to the mounting violence and repression wrought by the erosion of the Federation. Exile took many forms, however, and precipitated various consequences for both those who left and those who stayed behind. The political-economic shifts brought about by Eritrea's gradual reabsorption into Ethiopia resulted in one form of exile -- the migration of many young people for school or work into Ethiopia or to other neighboring countries like Egypt, Sudan, Syria, and the Gulf States. Certain high profile figures like Woldeab Woldemariam and Ibrahim Sultan were forced to leave Eritrea after suffering numerous threats and assassination attempts, but continued their activism abroad.¹⁴ Perhaps most significant but in some ways least visible were the tens of thousands of Eritreans whose villages and livelihoods had been destroyed, pushing them into other regions or across the border into Sudan. Finally, there were those small numbers of women and men who found themselves in the faraway countries of North America and Europe as university students, never imagining that conditions at home would either extend their sojourn indefinitely, or bring them back again as guerrilla fighters. The story of exile, as I will demonstrate throughout this study, forms a key component of Eritrean identity, the independence struggle, and the structure of a changing trans/national society.

In fact, the origins of the organized nationalist movement for independence themselves lie in exile. Cairo, Egypt was one of the major centers of early mobilization among Muslim Eritrean students attending Al-Azhar University. After Woldeab Woldemariam's arrival in 1953, the city became a hub for nationalist activism, and in 1955 the Egyptian government subsidized the first organization, the Eritrean Students' Club, where leaders of political groups and their followers gathered to discuss the Eritrean situation (Saulsberry 2002:236). Among members of the club, which later

¹⁴ See Saulsberry (2002) for an extensive description of Woldeab Woldemariam's activism in exile.

changed its name to Eritrean Students Union, were several young men who later helped form the Eritrean Liberation Front. By 1959, the student activists, now numbering several hundred, were joined by other exiled leaders like Ibrahim Sultan and Idris Mohamed Adem (Killion 1998:130-131).

However, the first formal pro-independence organization in exile was the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), formed in 1958 in Sudan. Known in Arabic as *Harakat Tahrir Eritrea*, or in Tigrinya as *Mahaber Show'ate* ("association of seven," for the ELM's tendency to establish secret cells of seven members each), the ELM professed a kind of secular, socialist nationalism. Founded by Muslim workers in Port Sudan and led by Mahmoud Said Nawd and Saleh Ahmed Iyay, ELM sought to transform the political culture of the 1940s by bridging the Muslim-Christian divide and rallying a mass movement (Saulsberry 2002:245). However, ELM initially failed to win support from important Cairo-based leaders like Ibrahim Sultan, Idris Mohamed Adem, and Woldeab Woldemariam (who himself finally joined ELM in 1962). Nevertheless, the founders of the small organization traveled to Eritrea to organize their cells of seven; their goal was to build a secular nationalist movement from the ground up, including among members of the government and police forces, that would then be in a position to challenge the occupying Ethiopian army. However, most Cairo students rejected the ELM due to its secular orientation and efforts to recruit Christians, gravitating more towards Idris Mohamed Adem's incipient Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF).

In September 1960, the ELM held its first congress clandestinely in Asmara, hoping to attract mass support. But already the ELF had begun organizing in the western lowlands, and by 1962 ELM had lost many members to the more radical ELF. In May 1965, fifty armed ELM fighters confronted the ELF and suffered defeat by disarmament. By 1967, ELF succeeded in driving the last remainders of the ELM out of Sudan and the organization dissolved into the ELF and other various factions (see Killion 1998: 195-196).

During the ELM's efforts to organize inside Eritrea, the ELF itself was forming in Cairo under the leadership of Mohamed Idris Adem and Idris Osman Galawdewos. Although most of ELF's early networks focused on the western lowlands and among Beni 'Amer clans in particular, it also attracted some early support from student activists in Eritrean towns who communicated with their counterparts in Cairo. Other recruits into ELF included Eritrean lowlanders who had been serving in the Sudan Defense Force. In 1962, the ELF consisted of 25 armed soldiers, one of whom, Hamid Idris Awate, fired the first shot of the armed struggle. The early ELF activities seemed rather indistinguishable from that of the anarchic, roaming *shiftas*, and indeed the front itself was initially cast by Ethiopia and many fearful highland Christians as Islamic fundamentalist bandits. As the ELF developed, its headquarters moved from Cairo to Kassala in Sudan, with some further important offices in Khartoum. The strategy of leadership-in-exile became a central feature of ELF's organizational structure, as we shall see in the following chapter.

Nationalist organizing in exile was not limited to Egypt and Sudan, however. In Ethiopia, Eritrean students knew a great deal about what was happening with the ELM and ELF and became involved in both the Eritrean movement as well as social changes taking place in Ethiopia itself. In Damascus, Syria, Eritrean students organized the General Union of Eritrean Students in 1968, a pro-independence organization with links to ELF. By 1970, such groups were forming anywhere Eritreans could be found. Similar developments in North America are the subject of chapter three.

The emergence of an organized nationalist movement is but one facet of the significance of exile. The less-told tale, however, is that of the swelling human tides of refugees that began pouring out of Eritrea during these same years. The atrocities inflicted on rural communities left little other hope beyond fleeing across the border of Sudan.

While several scholars have addressed the demographic and structural impacts of these migrations and post-war repatriation (Habte-Selassie 1992, 1996; Kibreab 1985, 1996; Opondo 1996), fewer have examined the psychological, social, and cultural aspects (see

Compton 1998). The reintegration of diverse exile populations into independent Eritrea remains a pressing issue and relates to those explored throughout this dissertation.

V. Concluding Remarks

In the preceding pages, I have explored how different identities articulated with one another and the consecutive periods of Italian, British, and Ethiopian rule in pre-nationalist Eritrean society and political economy. I have also shown how collective experiences of violence during the British Military Administration (BMA) and the Ethio-Eritrean Federation formed the basis for a common Eritrean identity among culturally diverse, politically fragmented populations. As a result of this violence, exile became an important dimension of early nationalist mobilization. The relationship between repression, exile, and nationalism continue to characterize Eritrean society today and shape the content and form of the trans/national social field that encompasses Eritreans all over the world and the Eritrean nation-state.

The widespread social disruption endured by Eritreans throughout successive colonial administrations shaped national identity through common, collective memories and experiences of violence and suffering. It also influenced the migration of many Eritreans abroad, especially those who developed an early nationalist consciousness. As the liberation struggle took shape, these patterns continued to play out. However, as the two fighting forces of the ELF and EPLF grew in size, strength, and mutual antagonism, the realities of violence and exile became much more complex. Ethiopia's role as a formidable adversary came to represent but one dimension of Eritrea's war; that between ELF and EPLF became another. Whether within Eritrea itself or vis-à-vis Ethiopia, then, violence has been central to the Eritrean experience. Its legacy endures in constructions of individual and collective identity as well as the trajectory of the Eritrean revolution, political culture, and the post-independence state (see Hepner 2000a; Compton 1998).

As Anderson's (1991) classic work on nationalism showed and as subsequent scholars have also argued (Basch et al 1994; Clifford 1994; Fuglerud 1999; Glick-Schiller 1999; Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001; Gilroy 1993; Hall 1990; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996; Malkki 1995a; Ong 1999; Rapport and Dawson 1998; van der Veer 1995), movement and displacement -- as a result of violence or not -- are often at the heart of imagining national communities. Since the inception of the nationalist movement, Eritreans have made use of exile, or spaces beyond the jurisdiction of state control and repression, to organize and mobilize for radical change within the very specific place of Eritrea. Exile as a location for action and as a component of identity became integral features of the Eritrean revolution, as I will continue to demonstrate. At the same time, however, the embeddedness of exile in Eritrean identity, society, and political-economy has had specific consequences for both exile communities as well as the Eritrean nation-state. These consequences are explored in the second half of the study. At present it is necessary to further our understanding of the liberation fronts' roles in constructing different kinds of nationalisms, and how the EPLF moved beyond the epiphenomenon of exile to map out a trans/nationalist social field in which those living abroad became central players in the liberation struggle and emergent state.

CHAPTER TWO

A Tale of Two Fronts: Nationalism and Political Identity in the ELF and EPLF

We must let the contradictions stand as what they are, make them understood as contradictions, and grasp what lies beneath them.

Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*

I. The Ethnography of Political Identity: Formative Moments

In any fieldwork experience, there are a handful of encounters potent enough to indelibly shape a study's method and meaning. Often disguised as ordinary bits of data, these moments may not reveal themselves as exceptional until much later. Others transpire with such vitality that they dramatically influence the course of inquiry and the anthropological imagination behind it. In their very definitiveness, they become ethnographic lighthouses illuminating our interpretive journey.

Upon returning home from the first part of a six-hour interview conducted with a former leading member of the Eritrean Liberation Front, I felt somewhere deep within a tectonic shift in my thinking about Eritrea and exile. As I wrote for hours afterward, trying to capture the essence of his affect -- for that was equally powerful to his words -- I realized the magnitude of what he had shared with me. In the same fearless manner that he must have taken up arms as a youth so many years ago, this man, whom I will call Asgedom, lowered his defenses and laid stark the torment of exile before me.

As he spoke and I listened, a tightening knot of vicarious grief threatened to stifle my humble epiphany. Never had I understood before the depths of Eritrean nationalism, political identity, and exile -- not as abstract phenomena but as lived experiences constitutive of one's very humanity. What Asgedom showed me that day demonstrated how, under certain historical conditions, politics might literally constitute personhood. It also drove home to me that the reified notion of "a state" conceals the roiling human

drama from whence it emerged and to which it is entrusted, for better or worse. On a methodological level, I was firmly convinced that “the connections between the political restructuring of states and personal and collective subjectivity and agency are accessible to ethnographic methods” (Greenhouse 2002:2). As several scholars have noted (Giddens 1985; Gledhill 1994; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Greenhouse, Mertz and Warren 2002; Herzfeld 1997; Kertzer 1988; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996; Malkki 1995a, 1995b, 1997; Nagengast 1994; Scott 1998) have noted, states and societies are not static entities in neutral space, removed from everyday lives and experiences. Rather, they are shifting complexes of people and roles (Herzfeld 1997:5) that actively intersect with -- and emerge from -- consciousness, culture, social action, and place. In that glimpse into Asgedom’s subjectivity, his personhood, I discovered that which is frequently absent in scholarly discussions of nations and states, and yet lies at the very heart of why such abstractions remain compelling to real men and women. Here follows some of what Asgedom showed me that day:

Field Notes, November 2000

Asgedom Abraham isn’t a tall man, but he seems like a giant. He stands very straight and carries himself with a certain striking dignity. His hounds-tooth jacket and black turtleneck lend him a modern, stylish affect and a youthfulness that belie his nearly 50 years. His skin is light and roughly textured. Like many habesha¹ men he wears a small mustache and is balding, but keeps his hair shaved close. Although he doesn’t wear glasses, he bears a resemblance to the great sociologist W.E.B. DuBois. A passionate energy emanates from him, surrounding him like an aura.

He is articulate and engaged, his voice carrying a softened edge unusual in most Tigrinya speakers, his speech punctuated with long pauses I am not sure how to interpret. Is he thinking and choosing words carefully? Searching for the right word? Sometimes, at particularly riveting moments of his story, I feel his emotion spilling over and beckoning my own. A couple of times he rubs his eyes deeply, and I wonder if the memories are painful, or moving, or overwhelming. His voice doesn’t betray him; it doesn’t crack or waver. He just stops speaking altogether. He falls silent for long moments and just...breathes. He leans forward and backward, fidgets with the cuff of his pants,

¹ *Habesha*, literally meaning Abyssinian, is commonly used as a self-descriptor among highland Eritreans and Ethiopians.

scratches his knees, crosses and uncrosses his legs. Sometimes his voice becomes very low and he speaks slowly; other times, he becomes agitated and slaps the table, hard. He doesn't need to justify the liberation war to me. Nor does he stop to explain the political intricacies, the tortured birth of EPLF out of ELF, and the parricide of sorts that brought him bewildered and nearly broken to the United States so many years ago. He is not afraid to speak freely. He locks into my gaze and I listen carefully, paying close attention to how he constructs his story.

We begin at the beginning, with where he was born and raised, but almost immediately we jump to his political involvement with ELF. I try to guide him back again but he resists. This is what defines his life: political activism, sacrifice, revolution. I surrender my interview design and control. He is going to tell his story, and I can prompt and seek clarification, but I cannot direct its flow. Only once do I again initiate a jump from his time as a fighter to his arrival in the US, and he stops and looks at me hard, interrupted. The jump is too great. There's a long story behind his exile that he must develop before it makes sense to address it. And his is unequivocally exile, as a member of the leadership of the ELF, as well as part of a dissident faction within the front, carried by lorry across the desert by his own erstwhile comrades, blindfolded, imprisoned, nearly executed.

He needs to speak this story, to tell it all as a linear progression. I have known about that need, even before this interview. He's told me about the books and memoirs he has tried to write, begun a thousand times and abandoned. At one point, after the tape recorder has been turned off, he motions to a shelf laden haphazardly with notebooks. He says that all of them are full of pieces of this story, the story of ELF. He wants to get it all down, to remember it and record it, make sense of it, before it is lost forever. He mentions his comrades by name, those who were arrested and imprisoned in Sudan with him. They are in Sweden, Ontario, Munich, California, Washington DC. One may be in Atlanta, one in Philadelphia. They may remember the names of all the secret prisons they were taken to by night that he can no longer recall. He is sad and incredulous that memory fails him now. He seems extremely cognizant and conscious of his own past, his history and experiences, and yet caught by surprise by it still, full of wonderment and questions about how the pieces fit together and make sense. And along with his own story, he wonders how the pieces of other lives and stories fit together and make sense, how they might form a whole out there in the world, a whole known as Eritrea.

It is poignant and powerful to observe him struggling to pull it together. He seems more lost than I in his labor to understand Eritreanness. Slowly through the course of our interview I see that he is using me as a way to take apart his pain and narrate it into coherence, for himself as an individual, as a member of an organization struggling to build a revolution, as an Eritrean, as an exile, and as a leader of a community of exiles. He laments again and again, "We don't know our own story, our own history...." Reflecting on the telling of his story and the other subtle indicators of his thoughts and feelings, those fleeting asides and gestures, small word choices that reveal barely tangible shades of being and experience, I understand that he wants to see this story reflected to him in me. Maybe this is one way that he seeks to achieve perspective. Maybe Eritreans, so deeply affected and transformed collectively by war, revolution, exile, and marginality -- as a nation and as a community of dispersed communities -- themselves are striving to "see" what happened to them, to find the sense and wholeness in the fragmented, yet somehow hopeful history and reality they inhabit so intensely. In telling those stories of themselves and their country ("When you ask an Eritrean about himself, he will only tell you about Eritrea," that man in Detroit said quietly as we gazed together at photographs of Eritrean deportees from Ethiopia praying in the desert), they are reaching for its

reflection of wholeness, searching for the unity they know must be there. Not just the reflection held up by outsiders, but in the mutual recognitions between Eritreans too. It is fascinating and moving, and deeply imbued with the pathos of loss and survival.

I learned many things from Asgedom in the course of my research. Sometimes I acquired this knowledge by listening to his words, and other times by simply studying his face and body language. At the time I wrote those fieldnotes, I also did not yet understand the tension between cohesion and fragmentation in the collective Eritrean experience and the lives of individual men and women. Neither did most Eritreans, although like Asgedom, many were acutely aware of it. At first glance, and by their own descriptions, Eritreans exude an uncanny uniformity of identity and purpose, which I once heard described as a kind of “monocular ultra-nationalism.” So what was at the heart of this tension I observed in Asgedom and countless others after him? What did he mean by “We don’t know our own story, our own history?” Whose story? Whose history? How many were there? How could Eritreans simultaneously appear to themselves and to others as so “unified” and yet remain so tormented, so fragmented, in their communities and inner lives? Was this unity merely a hollow, self-told tale or did it exist somewhere out there in space and time? What historical or structural developments accounted for this apparent paradox? And how could I interpret anthropologically the intensely personal experience of the political I observed among so many Eritreans?

II. Divergent Nationalisms and Political Identity

In the following pages I demonstrate that it is the original bond between national and political identity that lies at the heart of the tension between unity and fragmentation in Eritrea and its exile communities. One of the major arguments of this dissertation as a whole, largely novel to the literature on Eritrea, is that ELF and EPLF fashioned distinctive forms of nationalism out of the prevailing socio-cultural conditions facing Eritrean society. Through the process of recruitment, political indoctrination, and

incorporation into the daily life of the fronts in the areas they liberated and administered, nationalist identity co-evolved with political identity. Not only did becoming a fighter or civilian member of ELF or EPLF shape collective Eritrean identity, however. For many, the nexus of national and political identification helped constitute personhood itself by dramatically altering the social context in which individuals became identity-bearing subjects. This bond between contrasting political and nationalist identities, and the intermittent, violent civil war waged between ELF and EPLF from 1972 to 1981, left lasting marks on individual psyches, collective identities, and Eritrean exile communities. Its legacy continues to shape Eritrean society as the trans/nationalist project unfolds.

In this chapter I explore the relationship between dynamic pre-nationalist patterns and the development of ELF, and later EPLF, to illustrate their distinct nationalisms and the close linkage between political and national identity common to both fronts. More abstractly, I characterize ELF's nationalism as pluralist and EPLF's as synthetic (Medina 1997) in their encounters with competing sub-national identities. Chapter one has already addressed the formation of the ELF and the role played by exiles in Egypt and Sudan. Thus, the focus here is first on ELF's construction of nationalism and the relationship between the front's structure, ideology, and existing Eritrean socio-cultural patterns. Next, I analyze EPLF's emergence as a coalition of splinter groups from ELF and how it configured its nationalism and political agenda vis-à-vis both ELF and Eritrean society. In the penultimate section I draw on ethnographic data to probe the origins and depths of nationalism and political identity in the lives of Eritrean people, particularly in terms of the links between kinship, nationalism, and political affiliation. Finally, I address the role of the ELF-EPLF civil war in shaping national and political subjectivities and structuring mass migration, as it was largely ELF affiliates who went into exile in the 1980s.

It is important to grasp these links between national and political identity and exile prior to turning our attention to Eritrean communities in the United States. Other authors have broached the idea that ELF and EPLF related differently to Eritrean society

(Pool 2001; Woldemikael 1993) and noted the important connections between nationalist and political identity (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001:49). None, however, have framed the issues in terms of distinctive nationalisms, nor have they fully explored the depth and enduring significance of the bond between nationalism and political identity for Eritrean people, communities, and the nation-state.² My research has revealed that these two key issues have had an indelible impact on community relations in places like the United States as well as ongoing trans/national debates about national belonging and the meanings ascribed to concepts like citizenship, democracy and civil society by Eritreans today.

II. i. Nationalism and 'The Politics of Exclusion' : The Eritrean Liberation Front

II.i.i. Origins and Structure

The origins of the Eritrean Liberation Front, or *Jebha*, among lowland Muslim communities, students and exiles in Egypt and Sudan, and the early expression of nationalism through Islam, all proved decisive in the life, death, and legacy of the front. Despite the fact that little has been written about the continuity between Eritrean Islam and nationalism (Pool 2001:47) and that numerous Christians joined the front after 1968, since it's inception ELF has been viewed in both Eritreanist scholarship and in Ethiopian narratives (especially propaganda of the period) as Islamist in its nature and goals. Indeed, the front's 1962 clash with Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) was largely over religion: ELM's staunch secularism confronted the Islamism of early ELF leaders who shared links to powerful *tariqas* of the western lowlands like the al-Mirghani Khatmiyya (Killion 1998; Iyob 1995; Pool 2001:48). Moreover, we have seen how the very roots of

² Sorenson (1992, 1993) and Matsuoka and Sorenson (2001) do an excellent job detailing the internal politics of Eritrean and Ethiopian communities in Canada and the effects on individual lives and collectivities. However, they do not delve very deeply into ELF-EPLF politics in particular, nor do they suggest the idea of distinctive nationalisms. Similarly, Sorenson (1992, 1993) pays closer attention to *clashing* nationalisms between Ethiopians and Eritreans rather than among Eritreans themselves.

pro-independence sentiment were among Muslim lowland serfs whose class emancipation under Sheik Ibrahim Sultan's leadership during the British Military Administration years was justified in terms of Islamic egalitarianism. These principles remained important to the Cairo-based founders of ELF in 1960 and shaped the front's development.

The ELF's structure and ideological contours can be traced largely to the three founding individuals that dominated its first executive committee and the social milieus from which they came. Idris Mohammed Adem, Idris Osman Galawdewos, and Osman Saleh Sabbe each took up different posts in the leadership of the front, with Adem as the head and spokesman, Galawdewos directing military operations from Kassala, Sudan, and Sabbe claiming responsibility for foreign relations and fundraising (Pool 2001:49). Beginning in the western Beni 'Amer regions and fanning east towards Keren, the leaders drew upon their own clan-based connections, ethnic and regional solidarities, and connections with religious brotherhoods or *tariqas*, to recruit early fighters and win local support. Abroad, they appealed to Muslim Eritrean students and workers in Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States for external material and political support, and developed good relations with leaders like Jamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Maummar Qadafi in Libya, and the Ba'athist Party in Syria and Iraq (Iyob 1995:108; Markakis 1987:111). Inspired by the Arab nationalism of Nasser's Egypt and the Algerian revolution, the ELF leadership articulated Eritrean liberation largely in terms of Islam. Indeed, these individuals viewed Eritrea as more closely linked to the Arab world than to Africa. However, for many early ELF fighters this emphasis on Pan-Arabism and Islam appears to have been mostly an expression of the front's cultural continuity with the communities from which it was emerging, for whom Islam had been a unifying force.

II.i. ii. Contrasting Nationalist Grains

Given the historic incursions and cultural exclusion faced by lowland communities on account of Christian imperial expansion throughout the region, the deployment of Islam and ethnic or kin-based recruitment strategies in the ELF was hardly surprising (Markakis 1987:117). Most early Muslim nationalists made little distinction between highland Christian Eritreans and their Ethiopian counterparts. The Unionist Party's role in eroding the Federation and entrenching Ethiopian power suggested to them that most Eritrean Christians would not support independence. Moreover, the historic distinctions between lowland and highland regions remained strong, even as Italian colonialism, British administration, and Ethiopian occupation had wrought important changes. The lack of differentiation between Eritrean and Ethiopian highland Christians in the minds of early Muslim nationalists highlights the incipience of national identity in the early 1960s despite certain common experiences endured by Eritreans. This hostility towards highland Christians, as well as ELF's reproduction of lowland clan, class, and regional segmentation within its organization, has led Iyob (1995) and other authors embedded in the later EPLF perspective (Gebremedhin 1989; Iyob 1995; Pateman 1990, for example) to characterize the ELF as practicing a "politics of exclusion" (Iyob 1995:108).

However, a different interpretive tack could suggest that ELF's orientation was partly a response to the historic politics of exclusion practiced by the Ethiopian empire-state and the Eritrean highland Christian culture linked to it through religion, political-economy, language, and kinship. In chapter one, I explored how Eritrean lowland and highland regions were unevenly drawn into the cultural and political spheres of expanding and contracting empires, resulting in diverse socio-cultural patterns and the corresponding highland-lowland divide. Lowland Muslim communities were heavily influenced by the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and the Sudanese Beja populations to the west

with which they shared much in common, and experienced the encroaching Ethiopian empire-state as a “foreign” influence in many ways.

Thus, the analysis of ELF as exclusionary is embedded within the highland, Christian assumption that lowland Muslims’ separatism was self-imposed rather than historically determined. Reframed, however, the linkage between pro-independence nationalism, Islam, and regionally-specific ethnic and clan identities actually appears a politics of *inclusion* from the vantage point of lowland Muslim communities excluded and dominated by highland power structures. My point here is to note how scholarly treatments of “thick history,” or history still heavy with the weight of recent living memories and contemporary objectives, remains a politicized endeavor. Such reflexivity when writing about nationalist movements seems essential for retaining both a critical stance and intellectual autonomy from nationalist claims themselves.

As I will argue here, drawing largely upon the work of Markakis (1987) and Pool (2001), ELF’s politics and structure initially excluded highland Christians because it remained deeply embedded within pre-nationalist patterns and historical experiences common to the Muslim, lowland regions. It drew upon religious, regional, ethnic, and kin-based solidarities as an early recruitment technique, and only later found itself reproducing and entrenching sectarian identities and power struggles. While these features created serious problems for ELF as nationalist movement and guerrilla front, they also accommodated a more diverse range of identities and political positions within ELF’s construction of nationalism (see Pool 2001:142; Connell 1997:75). The incorporation of large numbers of highland Christians in the late 1960s and early 1970s actually highlights this flexibility, even as many scholars have focused solely on the discrimination and exclusion faced by early Christian recruits and have viewed ELF’s expansion into the highlands as an attempt to thwart the emergent EPLF. Today, many Eritreans -- both Christian and Muslim -- retain an emotional connection to ELF (if not a political programmatic one) but have found little in official narratives of nationalism and

history that genuinely values the ELF's contributions to the nation-state. Rather, ELF remains underexamined in the scholarly literature except as a negative foil for EPLF. By writing against this grain, I seek to uncover deeper complexities in Eritrean nationalism and contribute to a research agenda that accounts for marginalized histories and identities rather than assumes the vantage point of the dominant perspective.³ I also do so out of necessity: in order to render the politics of trans/nationalism and the experience of exile intelligible, the ELF and EPLF divide must be carefully interrogated.

My approach is not intended to obscure the hostility and mistrust faced by early Christian recruits into ELF, however. Certainly, some Christians were rebuked and discriminated against as a result of ELF's own origins and orientation. Nor am I celebrating ELF's flexibility and accommodation of important sub-national loyalties and identities within its nationalist framework, for these competing interests often devolved into sectarianism, aggravated existing tensions between communities, and weakened both the front and the independence movement as a whole. Rather, I want to point out that most treatments of ELF to date emerge from the standpoint of those whose political allegiance resides overtly or tacitly with EPLF, which has itself defined the parameters of that dominant analysis. That precious few analyses of ELF can be found is a testament to the front's marginalization in contemporary Eritrean studies. Contemporary, official nationalist discourse tends to reduce ELF's complexities and contradictions to simple failures, and ultimately, devalues the role of ELF in helping construct the nation-state. Yet, the legacy of ELF endures in the hearts and minds of millions of Eritreans and continues to represent an alternative nationalist subject position and political framework for the nation-state. For all of these reasons it deserves serious analysis.

³ It is telling that no full-length comprehensive study of the ELF yet exists in any language.

II.i. iii. Sectarianism and Fragmentation

The western lowland communities in which ELF took hold and from whom its first leaders were drawn had a long tradition of patronage based on ethnic and kinship ties within a caste-like class structure. Idris Mohammed Adem, Idris Osman Galawdewos, and Osman Saleh Sabbe drew upon this pattern as a tool of early recruitment and support as well as sources of power for themselves. After establishing cells of fighters in the regions they hailed from as well as in exile locations like Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria (and clandestinely in Addis Ababa and Asmara), they linked these directly to Cairo through their own personalities and ethno-regional or kin relationships. The attachment of fighter cells to the leadership structure in Cairo was informal and flexible, and each leader became a kind of “patron” for the zone of command in his native region. This ethno-regional and kinship-based patronage system worked well initially but later presented problems as the zones became “competing fiefs” with little to unify them in terms of consciousness, strategy, or objectives (Markakis 1987:115; see also Pool 2001:49-50).

Modeling ELF on the Algerian National Liberation Front (AFLN), the leadership created a four-zone structure corresponding to regions and populations. The first, strongest, and most populous zone was the western lowlands and consisted largely of Beni ‘Amer and Nara men who shared a patron-client linkage to Mohammed Idris Adem. The second zone was the northern highland regions, encompassing Keren and part of Sahel province. The majority of fighters came from the Bilien population and were connected to Idris Osman Galawdewos. The third zone consisted of highland regions like Akele Guzai, Seraye, and Hamasien. This zone indicated the ELF’s interest in eventually recruiting Christians; however, due to clashes between local Christians and Muslims as well as the political fragmentation of the BMA and Federation periods, the zone remained weak until the late 1960s and early 1970s when the numbers of Christian recruits increased dramatically. Consisting mostly of fighters from Muslim Saho communities,

zone three also lacked a patron among the leadership. Finally, zone four covered the eastern lowlands of Semhar and Denkel provinces and was dominated by the personality of Osman Saleh Sabbe and local Saho and Afar recruits (see Markakis 1987:113-115).

Zone commanders were appointed by the Cairo leadership from among the local populations and used their own kin and ethno-regional connections to recruit further fighters and members (Pool 2001:50). Loosely linked to the Revolutionary Command (RC), established in Kassala in 1962 to replace the original executive committee, each zone remained largely autonomous; commanders had a great deal of flexibility in designing and implementing military, administrative, and economic activities. The RC's intended role was to administer the zones centrally, and then link them back to the leadership in Cairo. However, as each zone competed for more patronage-based privileges from the leadership, including munitions, funds, and supplies, competition between zones soon devolved into power struggles among ethno-regional and clan populations as well as the leadership itself. ELF fighters also became embroiled in local community struggles and took sides with different populations. In the western and southeastern lowlands, some even participated in some attacks on Kunama and Afar groups (Markakis 1987:116). The zonal organization therefore entrenched long-standing hostilities among communities who held historic grievances against those from which the fighters were drawn. For example, Christian peasants in Akele Guzai, zone 4, saw the Saho ELF fighters as extensions of their traditional enemies (Pool 2001:51-52). Moreover, the leadership had not developed a firm political ideology to guide the struggle; they espoused a loose nationalism undergirded only by the goal of independence, and toyed with the idea that Eritrea would eventually become an Arab state.

When disaffected Christian students and workers started favoring independence in the late 1960s and looking to join the armed struggle, ELF had no formula or structure in place to absorb them. Secret cells existed in Asmara and Addis Ababa, and gradually

these began incorporating Christian members who donated funds, distributed nationalist literature, and joined the fighters in the field (Markakis 1987:118). Accordingly, a fifth zone was set up to accommodate the waves of new recruits and became known as “the Christian zone.” The strategy of creating a separate Christian zone was partly intended to alleviate tensions among Tigrinya peasants whose clashes with Muslim Saho neighbors had made them recalcitrant towards the Saho ELF fighters.

The long history of mistrust between Muslims and Christians surfaced powerfully in the ELF during the years of initial highland recruitment. In 1967, ELF fighters killed 50 Christian peasants migrating to the western regions to farm on suspicion they were spies for Ethiopia, upsetting many Christian recruits. Most of the new recruits came from urban backgrounds and had never lived under conditions of rural hardship nor met face to face the kinds of people from whom they now received orders. Older generations of fighters from the rural lowlands also viewed the younger, educated urbanites with suspicion and disdain. Traditional patterns of social distance between Christians and Muslims, such as the mutual taboo on consuming meats prepared by one another, created logistical problems in the field and led to further alienation. Overwhelmed by daily conditions and undernourished ideologically, many early Christian recruits defected from the ELF. Some later took up starring roles in Ethiopian propaganda, as newspapers and radio capitalized on their experiences to underscore the “Islamic separatist” agenda of the ELF rebels.

Beginning in 1966, ELF began sending both Christian and Muslim recruits to China, Cuba, and Syria for training. As the ranks of the front grew, the composition -- if not the structure -- of the fighting forces changed. The training in Maoist China had a particularly significant impact on the political consciousness of those who received it, leading to the rise of a dissident or reform movement called *Eslah* among new recruits. This movement included figures who later became leaders in EPLF, such as Isayas Afwerki, Ramadan Mohammed Nur, Abraham Tewolde, and Mohammed Ali Omero.

Eslah advocated a complete overhaul of the zonal structure and issued trenchant critiques of sectarianism in the field. They also demanded that the leadership come out of exile and into the field where it would not be so divorced from developments on the ground. Most of the reformers happened to be Christian, reflecting the differing subject positions and particular experiences of early highland recruits. However, they had numerous allies in other zones that together comprised a diverse ethno-regional and religious cross-section of Eritrean society.

In 1967 the Ethiopians launched their first assault on the ELF to a devastating effect. The poorly integrated zones and absent leadership highlighted the weaknesses of ELF's structure, although the widespread violence wreaked on local populations also insured a massive wave of recruits following the offensive (Markakis 1987:121). Thus, beginning in 1969, major efforts were initiated to address the various problems within the front. The conference, known as Adobha, created a new General Command, or *Qiada*, and re-zoned the field to help alleviate some of ELF's problems. But it did not root out the sectarianism caused by the early patron-clientism between commanders and leaders, nor the ethnic or kin-based solidarities among fighters in particular areas. The *Qiada* also clashed with the Cairo-based leadership, leading to Osman Saleh Sabbe's departure, who, using his remarkable powers of persuasion and ability to attract funds and support from Arab governments, began regrouping in Amman, Jordan; Khartoum, Sudan; and his home region near the Red Sea coast.

In 1970, ELF executed 300 fighters at a training camp in the western lowlands, all Christian recruits from Addis Ababa, on charges that they were spies for the Ethiopian regime. The move highlighted the enduring lack of trust between the two major religious groups and the failure to differentiate between Eritrean highlanders and Ethiopians in the sectarian Muslim view. Christians interpreted the bloody episode as proof that the leadership did not want them in the front and would prefer to sacrifice nationalism for their own interests and power (Markakis 1987:126-127). The massacre aggravated the

dissident movement, and numerous fighters -- especially the younger, educated radicals, many of whom were Christian -- broke with ELF altogether. Some abandoned the movement completely, others ended up regrouping with Sabbe, while still more went to join a group coalescing in eastern Akele Guzai at Ala. One of them was Isayas Afwerki, the later Secretary General of EPLF and the current president of independent Eritrea.

Also In 1970, some important ELF victories, the imposition of Ethiopian martial law throughout Eritrea, and increasing violence against civilian populations helped fuel nationalist sentiment in general, moving it further away from its Islamic roots. Indeed, “since the ELF was a front, not a political party, it was open presumably to all groups subscribing to its goal of independence for Eritrea” (Markakis 1987:128). At the same time, however, the pluralism of the front made it difficult to create a unifying nationalist framework even as it provided an “early testing ground for various ideological approaches to building a unified nationalist movement” (Killion 1998:186). This proved decisive for dissident groups seeking to create a different kind of movement altogether, despite numerous attempts to refashion ELF in structure and ideology.

Despite these difficulties, ELF fostered a genuine nationalist identity among its fighters and members. While portrayals of the Eritrean liberation struggle tend to focus almost exclusively on the EPLF following its emergence during the 1970-1973 period, ELF continued to recruit fighters from all regions and backgrounds up until its dissolution and exile into Sudan in 1981-82. The front continued to grow in numbers and strength even as it fought against both EPLF and the Ethiopian regime. While the front’s nationalist framework lacked clarity and its structure was wracked by the internal sectarianisms born of its deep roots in pre-existing socio-cultural patterns, the men and women who became Eritrean in the context of ELF remain very cognizant today of the front’s role in their consciousness and experience.

II. i. iv. Pluralist Nationalism

Because it lacked clarity, consistency, and a firm internal disciplinary mechanism, the nationalism ELF inculcated in its members retained a fluidity and flexibility capable of accommodating multiple identities and diverse subject positions. In better moments, this flexibility allowed for healthy dissent among members, a range of political currents and ideas, tolerance for loyalties other than national ones, and the continuing recruitment of new fighters of all backgrounds. The polysemic dynamism of ELF's nationalism showed potential as a strong unifying force, but the front itself remained hobbled by the legacy of its early structure and the contradictions born of it. At worse moments, continuities between ELF's nationalism and pre-existing social patterns devolved into rigid sectarianisms, narrow power struggles between individuals and collectivities, a lack of coordination and discipline, and military vulnerability.

In her exploration of competing nationalist projects in Belize, in which unity and difference are co-constructed in efforts to define the nation, Medina (1997) applies the notion of pluralist, synthetic, and hegemonic nationalisms. Each one of these nationalisms participates in the overall construction of Belizean nationhood, respectively embracing ethnic and racial differences, homogenizing them, or identifying the nation with a single dominant population. According to this model, originally proposed by Bolland (1988), pluralist nationalism not only makes difference highly visible, but also legitimizes these differences through the co-existence and persistence of sub-national identities and categories. The nationalism constructed by ELF represents such a pluralist formulation, in which differences based on religion, region, kinship, and class not only continued to matter, but formed part of the structural logic of the front itself.

Ultimately, ELF's pluralist nationalism failed due to the front's internal fragmentation and pressures applied by EPLF and the Ethiopian regime. At the heart of contemporary critiques leveled at EPLF and the post-independence regime by former ELF members, however, lies the flexibility of this pluralist nationalism and its ongoing

competition with EPLF's synthetic nationalism. In the words of one longtime exile, "The people who were in *Jebha* were more democratic as a result of the demise of ELF. It's because it was more open -- you did not have that strict mental discipline, and that's one reason leading to its demise. Because they were more open, more democratic, because the structure was not that rigid, the people from *Jebha* are more open-minded, in fact." This contrasts with the rigors of both the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front and the post-independence government, as we shall see. It has also borne lasting consequences for contemporary Eritrean trans/national politics.

II. ii. Nationalism and the Homogenization of Identities: The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front

II.ii.i. Origins and Structure

The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front, or EPLF, formed from a coalition of two pro-reform groups that abandoned both ELF and other competing factions around 1970 to create a new front altogether.⁴ Not yet adopting a name for itself, the leaders of this movement -- which included Isayas Afwerki and Ramadan Mohammed Nur -- penned a highly influential statement entitled "Our Struggle and Its Goals" [ነሕናን ዕላማን].⁵ The document, which revealed a sensitive, nuanced perception of ELF's emergence among lowland Muslim communities, became the basis for EPLF's ideological and nationalist program. It also anticipated the kinds of critiques and questions that would be leveled at it by ELF and other competing forces, including the Ethiopian regime.

The authors of "Our Struggle," reportedly Isayas and Ramadan themselves,⁶ admitted up front that "It is true that almost all of us or a majority of us are Christians by

⁴ The political developments surrounding the formation of EPLF are exceedingly complex and not within the scope of this work. Interested readers are directed to Iyob (1995), Markakis (1987), and Pool (2001) for detailed analyses. Killion (1998) is also a helpful resource.

⁵ While the literal translation from Tigrinya means "We and Our Objectives," the document is more commonly referred to in English as "Our Struggle and Its Goals."

⁶ Some sources attribute sole authorship of the document to Isayas Afwerki.

birth, cultural and historical background.”⁷ Following a detailed history of Eritrean claims to nationhood and an analysis of the emergence and development of ELF, the authors stated:

We wish to make it clear that we separated from the fascist administration of ‘Jebha’ and not from fellow freedom fighters. It is a big shame that there should exist religious, ethnic, and other divisions within the Eritrean liberation struggle. As freedom fighters, our role should be to eradicate this and other ills of Eritrean society; and in no way should we create a situation wherein such ills could be accentuated. . . The nature of our separation might give the impression that we gathered on the basis of religion. But what alternative did we have? In fact, what saddens us is not the fact that we have gathered together and separated, but the harsh causes that forced us to do so, for we uphold the primacy of our country and our people over religion. We are freedom fighters and not preachers of the gospel. What led us to take the stand we have taken is revolutionary conviction and not spiritual preaching. We consider what we have done to be induced by revolutionary courage, honesty, and love of our country. . . . Whether it be amongst our people or within our armed struggle, the opportunist bosses of ‘Jebha’ have, in the pursuit of their selfish interests, found it expedient to promote ethnic and sectarian antagonism and managed to create and sustain numerous divisive factions among the Eritrean people and fighters.⁸

The document went on to list the objectives of the new front. These were:

To create a society where no economic exploitation or political oppression of man by man exists;
To build a prosperous nation with educational, agricultural, and industrial development;
To establish a National United Front with no distinction as to religion, ethnic affiliation, or sex;
To establish close solidarity with all progressive peoples in the world, especially those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America;
To combat world imperialism led by the United States;
To smash Israeli Zionism;
To wage armed struggle to gain national liberation from Ethiopian oppression as an immediate goal.⁹

Indeed, the founders of what would soon become EPLF, or *Sha’bia*, meaning “popular,” managed to lay out in this single document a more defined ideological and nationalist framework than ELF had done in its first decade. “Our Struggle and Its Goals” rapidly made its way throughout international Eritrean networks and galvanized scores of

⁷ “Our Struggle and Its Goals,” from the English language translation printed in *Harnet* (Eritreans for Liberation in North America), vol. 2, no. 3, March 1973, pp. 5-23.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

people either disenchanted with ELF or not yet converted to the nationalist movement. At the same time, however, and against the cautioning of its authors, it entrenched the image of ELF as Islamic separatist and politically vacuous, and the emergent EPLF as Christian-led and ideologically sophisticated.

II.ii.ii. Justifying Synthetic Nationalism

The image of ELF as reactionary, sectarian, and Islamist was actively constructed in the Ethiopian propaganda. But it was also entrenched by the highland Christian background of many of EPLF's founders and the front's subsequent self-presentation strategies. Since the earliest days of the liberation struggle, Ethiopia cast the Eritrean movement in terms guaranteed to frighten and alienate highland Christians, upon whom its power base depended. Deploying its own hegemonic nationalism (Medina 1997; Bolland 1988), which constructed Ethiopian national identity in terms of the dominant *kebessa* history, culture, language, and religion, the Ethiopian regime denied the legitimacy of Eritrean nationalism in part by casting ELF as Muslim, peripheral, and Other. Such an approach exploited the rifts between Eritrean Christians and Muslims by obscuring their common qualities and experiences.

Ethiopia capitalized on the negative experiences of early Christian recruits to ELF and propagated the idea that the front was fighting to create an Islamic state. Referring to the original ELF leadership's ties to Arab states and movements, Ethiopian discourse, including that of Left-wing students in the latter 1970s, framed the nationalist movement as secessionist rather than anti-colonial. It also sought to stem the spread of nationalism among highland Christians by denying Italian colonialism as a basis for nationhood and therefore undermining Eritrean claims to uniqueness.¹⁰ After the formation of EPLF and

¹⁰ See Gebremedhin (1989) and AESNA/AEWNA (1978) for examples of the Eritrean nationalist response to Ethiopian discourse and propaganda. Sorenson (1993) and Matsuoka and Sorenson (2001) provide a more dispassionate account of these clashing narratives.

a massive increase in Christian participation, however, the nationalist movement could no longer sustain even an epithetic description as Islamic. Thereafter, Ethiopian tactics focused on sowing religious and political discord between the two fronts and undermining the basis of nationalist claims by trivializing Eritrea's colonial past and denying Ethiopia's imperial occupation.¹¹

Among EPLF's early tasks was a twofold ideological effort. First, the front countered Ethiopian claims by emphasizing the legacy of Italian colonialism and British occupation. At the same time, it discredited ELF and its nationalism by highlighting the latter's sectarian tendencies. EPLF sought to distance itself, and the definition of the nation, from the divisive dynamics of the 1940s and 50s, Pan-Arabism and Islam, and the actually existing divisions in both Eritrean society and the ELF. To that end, it situated Eritrea squarely within the African colonial context and drew upon class-based ideologies of Maoism and Marxism-Leninism to justify its approach to nationalist struggle. Adopting the language of Third World nationalism and pitting its Left-wing revolutionary socialism against the Cold War hegemony of the US and Israel, EPLF presented itself as a secular, African, anti-colonial, class-based movement with rural roots that opposed imperialism and sectarianism. Moreover, it sought to transform Eritrean society during the course of struggle itself into a progressive, egalitarian, and radical democratic environment. It emphasized ELF's Islamic origins and its ethno-regional and kin-based sectarianism in order to bolster its own legitimacy and appeal, even as its propaganda colluded with Ethiopia's to entrench the idea that ELF represented Muslim interests while EPLF represented Christian ones. Using ELF as a foil in nearly every conceivable way, often manipulating Ethiopian propaganda to its own advantage, EPLF sought to break the association between nationalism and Islam, sever the pro-independence movement's deep roots in lowland socio-cultural patterns, and develop a more rigorous ideological and

¹¹ See Holcomb and Ibssa (1990) for an analysis of central Ethiopian imperial expansionism and cultural hegemony.

military structure that would support its immediate and long-term state-making objectives.

One of the EPLF's major successes over time was the continuity between its organizational structure and nationalist ideology. The relationship between these features of the front stemmed from its adoption of democratic centralism as the turbine of power and authority, a mass-based organizational strategy that drew fighters and civilians into a pragmatic process of political education and social change, and a strong analytical focus on "nationality" and class as the major cleavages in Eritrean society. However, the emergence of a highly disciplined military front with state-like administrative characteristics transpired over nearly a decade and not without some violence and repression. The rise of EPLF and its synthetic nationalism took place in the context of near constant attacks by Ethiopia and civil war with ELF. As such, it was both fitful in its development and extremely powerful for those who entered its ranks.

Ruth Iyob (1995:124-125) identifies three phases and lessons that shaped the EPLF over the course of its development. During the early years of its formation, from 1969 to 1975, the front worked at delineating Eritrea's colonial experience in the African context and reshaping popular historical consciousness. At the same time, it rejected ELF's Islamist current and the implication that Eritrean Christians and Muslims could not together comprise a bonafide nation. During the second phase, 1976-1981, EPLF radicalized its ideology and expanded its organizational structure to assume state-like characteristics in the areas it liberated (see also Pool 2001).¹² During that time it focused on eliminating ELF from the field and contending with the post-1977 Ethio-Soviet alliance. In its third phase, 1982-1991, the front coordinated various campaigns and nurtured alliances with groups in Ethiopia to erode the Derg regime under Mengistu Haile Mariam and secure Eritrea's final liberation. Throughout these three phases EPLF

¹² As chapters four and five will demonstrate, EPLF assumed statelike characteristics not just in liberated Eritrea, but throughout early exile communities as well.

adopted a stance that was at once flexible, disciplined, and pragmatic. It learned through experience, Iyob argues, that religion and “patronage politics” must be defused and excised from nationalism, and that the front must strive for structure and discipline at all costs.

Beginning in 1973, then, the EPLF leadership, with Ramadan Mohammed Nur and Isayas Afwerki at the helm, took major steps to subvert the logic of ELF’s zonal system and thus eradicate the sectarianisms it fostered. In an effort to thwart ethnic and religious tensions before they began, the leadership deliberately refused to adopt either Tigrinya or Arabic as official languages and forbade associations of any kind to form on the basis of ethnicity, region, or religion. It also chose to mix up individual fighters of different backgrounds rather than zoning them according to linguistic, religious, ethno-regional, or kin affiliation as ELF had done (Pool 2001:75). With democratic centralism at its authoritative core,¹³ the front developed strict procedures for ensuring obedience to the political line (with severe punishment for dissidence or recalcitrance), and created extensive programs for political education, literacy, and military training. These early initiatives contrasted with ELF’s much more relaxed approach, in which “things seemed to happen more by chance than design, discipline was loose, and the guerrillas within the ELF appeared to have more diversity of outlook than those in the EPLF” (Connell 1997:75).

Also beginning in 1973, however, EPLF experienced a major internal spasm that solidified its commitment to democratic centralism and revealed a serious intolerance for deviant politics in its ranks. The *Menk’a* movement, as it was called, involved a relatively small group of fighters, most of them former students in Asmara or at Addis Ababa University, who criticized Isayas Afwerki in particular for centralizing control over the

¹³ Democratic centralism involves a pattern of ostensibly open democratic discussion among large groups, after which the leadership makes final and inviolable decisions (see Connell 1997:42).

front.¹⁴ They called for both more democratic decision-making and the implementation of Marxist-oriented social programs. After lengthy debates and a trial, five of the leaders of *Menk'a* were executed by the EPLF leadership and the “ultra-leftist” dissident movement was crushed (Killion 1998:309). EPLF further centralized its control and devised severe punishments for dissidence (Pool 1998:25). Several years later, in 1976, another internal movement known as *Yasin*, or “rightist,” also emerged. Little is known about this movement except for its relationship to Tigrinya regionalist highland identities rooted in Akele Guzai and Hamasien provinces. Its members criticized the EPLF leadership for neglecting their own home regions and recruiting for EPLF in ways that would ensure broad representation (a process that often required targeting particular populations). Like *Menk'a*, the *Yasin* movement was rapidly crushed and its perpetrators executed in 1980. As Pool (2001:86) notes in his analysis of the movement, “divisions between Tigrinyans on the basis of provincial primordialism was a horrific spectre for the leadership and had to be quashed.”

Thus, through structure, authority and discipline, EPLF constructed a framework for synthetic nationalism. This synthetic nationalism aimed to “create a shared national culture by mixing and combining practices and values associated with constituent ethnic cultures” (Medina 1997:760). After its first Congress in 1977, the front’s reorganized central committee and political bureau fully represented Eritrea’s diverse social, political, educational, religious, and cultural composition, thus mirroring the synthetic nationalist position it espoused. Through implementing rigorous political education training for fighters, mandatory literacy campaigns, and the Maoist practice of criticism and self-criticism, the front propagated its analysis of Eritrean society as cleaved by class and ethnic divisions and justified its nationhood on the basis of successive colonialisms, of which Ethiopia was the latest example.

¹⁴ መንክላ, meaning “bat,” as in the animal.

Drawing upon arguments first made in “Our Struggle and Its Goals” and elaborating them in its 1977 National Democratic Program, EPLF incorporated into its educational programs a strong focus on Eritrea as a multi-ethnic nation. The front emphasized that Eritrea’s nine different “nationalities,” with unique linguistic and cultural attributes to be preserved and celebrated, each possessed a fundamental equality of rights vis-à-vis one another. Religious beliefs should be the private province of individuals and should not have any bearing on politics. Women must be mobilized and the fetters of traditional patriarchy smashed. And finally, the front argued, secular socialism based upon class alliances between workers, peasants, and revolutionary intellectuals would drive the revolution and propel Eritreans into a new kind of society altogether, protected and guaranteed by an independent state under EPLF’s control (see EPLF 1977). However, for such a project to succeed, existing differences needed to be synthesized and homogenized to create a new kind of subject who identified first and foremost as Eritrean.

The basic tenets of EPLF’s approach presented an alternative, if not an antidote, to both the bitter politics of the ‘40s and ‘50s and ELF’s ostensibly undefined and fractious nationalism. Unlike EPLF’s emphasis on “unity in diversity” and strict obedience to the party line, ELF’s nationalism appeared an amalgamation of various possible positions, demanding neither strict disciplinary adherence nor the fundamental altering of society via revolutionary struggle itself. However, EPLF’s clear definitions pushed ELF to reformulate aspects of its own program, a task made all the more difficult by the real diversity of perspectives within that front.

Already embroiled in a civil war with EPLF and facing more internal dissident movements yet again, ELF in 1975 released a new programmatic position that proclaimed support for freedom of speech, thought, press, association, and religion. However, these were to be implemented mainly after independence, with the accompanying caveat that “only those ideas, institutions, which have been carefully experimented with and nurtured

by the Eritrean Revolution shall be legitimate. . . Only the revolutionary government and those who participated in the victory of the revolution shall be the exponents of the new economy and culture” (Connell 1997:82). ELF’s revised stand seemed to be a direct response to EPLF’s platform, including its calls for disciplined unity and obedience. What impact this had on ELF’s practice, structure or vision for independent Eritrea remains unclear.

The multiethnic vision of national unity EPLF espoused, together with its pragmatic and disciplined ethic, comprised what Matsuoka and Sorenson (2001) refer to as EPLF’s “moral economy.” This moral economy remained equally strong among individuals as it did collectively, and expanded well beyond the realm of fighters in the field to include civilians and exiles as well. As Connell (2001:28) writes, “The notion that each fighter had to model the EPLF’s politics was embedded in the structure of the organization, which set out to re-mold its members in order to transform the society at large.” As heroes and guardians of that new society, fighters provided a role model for all other Eritreans who invested in the cause. The *tegadelti* literally embodied the new nationalist subject and their discipline and actions expressed the essential qualities of Eritrean people: humble, courageous, honest, loyal, compassionate, fiercely self-determined.

At the same time, the necessary submission of all identities beneath the primacy of nationalism became what Pool (2001:89) refers to as a “form of social control, through the provision of a shared vision of the past based on a set of ideological precepts that demonized religion and tribe.” This demonization of religion and “tribe” clearly stemmed from the EPLF’s efforts to distance itself from ELF as a movement, and in many ways, from pre-existing social patterns themselves. Whereas ELF remained embedded in traditional socio-cultural patterns and wanted to defer broad social change until after the struggle was over, EPLF removed itself from these pre-existing patterns and created alternative social relations associated with nationalism itself (Pool 2001).

This fact has led Pool (2001) to characterize EPLF as autonomous from Eritrean society and impermeable to its traditional cleavages. I would argue, however, that EPLF was no more autonomous from Eritrean society than ELF. Rather, it merely configured itself differently vis-à-vis that society, seeking to change existing social relations rather than reproduce them. Its position cannot be understood without constant reference to the kinds of socio-cultural and political patterns it sought to change. One of the most powerful ways in which it accomplished change was through the breaking of all former identities and allegiances among its recruits and resocializing them as members of the front. It also connected its class and nationality-based analyses to the everyday life of Eritrean civilians under its administration, teaching about exploitation and the possibility of change through local, naturally-occurring, context-specific scenarios. But it would be misleading to argue that EPLF *eradicated* distinctions based on class, ethnicity, region, religion, gender, or generation, or that its nationalism remained impervious to them. By remaking selves within the life of the front and carefully steeping competing identities in synthetic nationalism, EPLF created a new national terrain. But that process, from its inception until the present, has been neither smooth nor complete. Contemporary Eritrean political culture and ongoing trans/national debates about power, identity, democracy, and the constitution of society illustrate that nationalism is a continuous struggle, in which pluralist and synthetic models continue to compete for the definition of the nation and control of the state (see Medina 1997).

II.ii. iii. Expanding Synthetic Nationalism: Organizing the Masses

Broader Eritrean society also participated in and contributed to the EPLF's moral economy, and it is partly in the relationship of the front to the broader population that the synthetic, yet inchoate, quality of EPLF's nationalism became most evident. The incorporation of large numbers of women after 1973 and the reconfiguration of gender, family, and sexual/marital relations within EPLF structure and nationalism were also

central in this regard (see Bernal 2000a; Connell 1997, 2001; Pool 2001; Silkin 1989; Wilson 1991).

One of EPLF's greatest avenues for social change proved to be the mass organizations it developed during the late 1970s. While ELF also created mass organizations of students, workers, and women, observers have referred to them and to ELF's social programs largely as "form over substance" (Connell 1997:87). Indeed, much less information is available about ELF's mass organizations than EPLF's, which have been hailed by many researchers as the key to the front's success and popularity during the liberation war.¹⁵ It is important to address here how EPLF structured and mobilized Eritrean civilians in its mass organizations, since these became key purveyors of nationalist identity and the major avenues by which EPLF created and sustained a trans/nationalist social field beneath its administrative control.

The push to organize and mobilize the "broad masses" (*hafash*; ህፋሽ) locally and in exile occurred at a time when EPLF was both maturing as a military and political front and also intensely engaged with fighting Ethiopia and the ELF. At the same time, EPLF was absorbing large numbers of new recruits fleeing Ethiopian occupation and the internal fragmentation of ELF. After Osman Saleh Sabbe absconded from EPLF in 1975, severing it from the funds, supplies, and Arab allies in his custody, the front was largely isolated from external support. During this period it devised its hallmark strategy of "self-reliance" as a coping mechanism that incorporated by design (and necessity) the direct participation of Eritrean civilians. Modeled on Maoism, EPLF's self-reliance and mass organizing strategies were closely linked together. Both consisted of fostering strong and positive relations with farmers, workers, women, and youth, as well as with exiles abroad who could help with money and supplies. Self-reliance also included

¹⁵ As we will continue to see, however, Eritreans who entered into ELF's ranks through its mass organizations developed a loyalty to that front not unlike that which formed among EPLF members and supporters.

capturing and rehabilitating any and all munitions and equipment from the Ethiopian troops. As Dan Connell observed firsthand (1997:40), the EPLF fighters were consummate pragmatists who “did more with less, treating everything that fell into their hands as a potential resource.”

Creating and sustaining self-reliance required the coordination and cooperation of vast numbers of people, not all of them members of the fighting forces. By establishing mass organizations among segments of the population, EPLF utilized the potential of Eritrean civilians while also inculcating them with its particular political and nationalist consciousness. Under EPLF’s administration, everyday Eritrean men and women experienced the effects of the front’s policies and praxis as they implemented them into their daily lives, guided by the fighters themselves. Within the context of the mass organizations, Eritreans lived under EPLF’s statelike administration while the front experimented with methods and ideologies that could best suit diverse local conditions. The mass organizations also helped neutralize the potentially fractious ethnic, regional, religious, and kin identities that had bedeviled early nationalism and the ELF by bringing diverse groups together for the first time. At the same time, the mass organizations also implemented important social changes on the basis of other class, gender, occupational, and generational inequalities. In return for their participation and mobilization, EPLF provided the population with educational, health, veterinary, and practical services and skills, as well as military protection from the Ethiopian forces.

As important components of EPLF’s statelike capacity, mass organizations were overseen by the front’s leadership structure, which included a top-tier political bureau (or “Politbureau”) and a larger, second-tier central committee. The Politbureau supervised a number of administrative bodies, including committees for military and political affairs, departments of economics, health services, social welfare, and mass administration. The department of public or mass administration, *kifli hizbi* [ክፍል ህዝቢ], was responsible for the development and activity of all the EPLF mass organizations, including those in exile.

As Pool (2001:85) points out, the mass administration was a crucial instrument in the front's expansion, organization, and control over Eritrean society in the liberated, semi-liberated, and occupied areas. Similarly, Connell (1997:5) sees the EPLF's main achievement reflected in these mass organizations, as they enabled "the direct engagement of much of the Eritrean civilian population in the process of social change and nation-building. . . with broad social equality and popular participation across clan, ethnic, religious, gender, and class lines." He describes in detail how fighters used everyday scenarios, like disputes over land, inter-ethnic or inter-religious hostility, spousal abuse, forced marriage, or health and hygiene problems, to educate people and create targeted projects for mass organizations.

The mass organizations, which grouped women, workers, youth, and peasants into their own "democratically-functioning" associations, thus provided an important meeting ground for EPLF fighters and civilians as well as a kind of laboratory in which to test EPLF's proposed reforms. Mass organizations were vehicles for imparting political education, historical and nationalist consciousness, basic literacy and hygiene skills, and new social and economic arrangements. They were also small-scale social experiments in grassroots democracy and empowerment, giving local people an unprecedented chance to debate the structural conditions shaping their lives. Recognizing that categories of people were also internally differentiated on the basis of class and therefore uneven in their revolutionary consciousness, however, EPLF subdivided the mass organizations and tailored its education and training for each constituency. Thus, wealthy peasants were educated somewhat differently from poor ones, to help eradicate "bourgeois" tendencies and to elevate the self and public image of the poor and oppressed. In the case of youth, the front created separate divisions for older adolescents, called the Vanguard, and young children, the Red Flowers. While adolescents learned skills that prepared them to become fighters later, young children performed nationalist songs and dances. Women and children also frequently acted as lookouts or spies for the fighters. Each mass

organization's activities and training differed according to pre-existing patterns of social difference, and offered unique opportunities to participate directly in the revolution itself. As Connell observed, "political activity became in many respects the national sport, with so many levels and points of entry that nearly everyone could play" (1997:102).

Another aspect of setting up mass organizations entailed the breaking of traditional administrative systems that maintained links between Eritrean communities and the Ethiopian state, and replacing them with EPLF structures. Land reform proved to be an important method of intervention which simultaneously weakened the Orthodox's Church's power (and thus the linkage to the Ethiopian state) and altered class, kin, and gender privileges (see Tronvoll 1998a, 1998b; O'Kane 2002). Under the EPLF, women and unmarried men could inherit land for the first time. Moreover, allowing representatives to be elected from each mass organization in a given area (workers, peasants, women, and youth) to broader Peoples Assemblies (*baito*; ቤተ) provided another important way of challenging traditional "feudal" power structures in which class, gender, age, and kinship determined authority and privilege (Pool 2001:119). While these processes varied across urban and rural locations and in different regional areas, the end result was EPLF's ascendancy to the primary administrative force with broad support among the general population.

III. The Locations of National and Political Identity

Among Eritreans today, and especially those in exile, former affiliations with either EPLF or ELF endure as a primary basis for differentiation (and often fragmentation), shaping both exile communities and trans/nationalist exchanges with the Eritrean state and society. Despite the liquidation of ELF from the field in 1981-82, the achievement of independence in 1991, and the transformation of EPLF from a front to a government, political identities powerfully endure in the imaginations and actions of Eritrean people. These identities frequently underpin the observable fractiousness in

many exile communities, complicate the Eritrean state's trans/national authority, and represent a threat to the ruling regime's stability and nationalist hegemony. Former factions of ELF and newly created coalitions represent a very real opposition to the PFDJ regime and the primary force behind new calls for democracy, even as their activities are largely confined to exile locations. Moreover, the opposition continues to draw upon the ideological and cultural differences between the ELF and EPLF in the 1970s to stake their contemporary claims, while the ruling regime manipulates past grievances to reassert its own legitimacy.

But as much as political identities divide them, Eritreans also insist a broader national unity exists above and beyond these narrower distinctions. Thus while nationalism unites in general, it also divides in particular: differences in political identity frequently indicate differences in ideas about national identity and nation-building, internally cleaving people even as it gathers them in through common historical experience. But how and why have political identities remained so important to so many Eritreans, even long after independence? Why do Eritreans wrestle so fiercely with one another over these distinctions, and what does it mean for the trans/nationalist project? Addressing these issues begins with acknowledging first and foremost that for those who lived through and participated in the struggle, becoming Eritrean took place in the context of becoming -- or refusing the become -- members of ELF or EPLF, revealing "a tendency. . .to merge national identity with political affiliations" (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001:49).

This section lays a foundation for understanding the paroxysms of unity and disunity among Eritreans today by examining the relationship between nationalism, political identity, and other sub-national identities. In particular, I explore how the breaking and remaking of selves into new national subjects replaced traditional allegiances with loyalty to ELF or EPLF. How did the adoption of nationalism alter other ways of knowing oneself and one's compatriots, and with what consequences? What

common grounds did nationalism establish in spite of its internal divisions? What compelled people towards either an ELF or EPLF political identity? Why does that identification continue to carry so much weight for so many? Why does kinship in particular loom so large? The answers to these questions help us grasp the depths that politics plumb in the individual and collective lives of Eritrean people. They also point us towards further ones about ongoing clashes within the nation-building project and the centrality of exile as a locus for new ideas and practices of citizenship, belonging, and state-civic relationships in transnational contexts.

III.i. Birthing the Eritrean Family: The Implications and Uses of Kinship

Throughout this chapter, I have shown how EPLF's particular nationalism stemmed from its reaction to both ELF and the pre-nationalist patterns, identities, and power relations expressed and entrenched by it. In this section, I further explore the interrelationship between political identity, nationalism, and kinship in particular. While identities such as gender, generation, religion, and region also remain important factors, kinship often mediates these by encompassing them within a larger and emotionally durable social map that nationalism then seeks to mimic, co-opt, or even eclipse. That is, in traditional Eritrean society, membership in a kin group also frequently delineates membership in other identity groups while proscribing important associated roles. Nationalism, for its part, adopts the language and logic of blood-kin connections but reorients them towards the national "family," disrupting the links between kinship and other categorical identities, and replacing the former's affective power with its own (see Glick-Schiller and Fouron 1999). In this way, nationalism takes on a seemingly natural, or "primordial" quality for those who embrace it, while obscuring its ideologically-based, "invented" nature (Calhoun 1997:33; see also Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

One reason why EPLF was able to successfully reconfigure traditional socio-cultural patterns and identities was its administrative, state-like capacity. Perhaps nowhere was this so evident as in the case of gender and sexuality. But changes in gender roles, marriage laws, and sexual relations are first and foremost changes to the family itself and the role of kinship norms in upholding certain traditional patterns. An analysis of EPLF's approach to gender and marriage thus reveals key elements about the significance of kinship and family to EPLF's nationalist project as well as the ways in which the front's administrative capacities complemented its ideological objectives.

In addition to mobilizing civilian women in mass organizations and raising consciousness about their specific social issues, EPLF fighters -- both male and female -- set powerful examples for female emancipation and potential by demonstrating the social constructedness of gender roles. To begin with, tasks formerly associated with either males or females became the equal responsibility of both, introducing a very radical notion of egalitarianism for traditional-minded villagers. After 1973, EPLF began incorporating large numbers of women into its ranks and providing specialized training for their participation in all realms of the front. By 1977, fully 30% of the EPLF's forces consisted of women in various roles, from barefoot doctors, teachers, and veterinarians to engineers, mechanics, and platoon commanders. This contrasted again with ELF's approach, which placed women largely in supportive rather than leadership roles and did not systematically address gender as a primary location of social oppression.

The experience of women in EPLF has attracted much attention from researchers as they have probed the extent to which the front, and radical political movements more generally, reconstructed ideas about masculinity and femininity and the relationship of these to the practical nationalist project (Barth 2001; Bernal 2000a; Connell 2001; Gruber and Garcetti 1998; Hale 1997; Hodgkin 1997; Mama 1992; Selassie 1992; Silkin 1989; Wilson 1991). Indeed, gender permeated most aspects of EPLF's social reforms, enabling women to inherit land or initiate divorce, discouraging child marriage and female genital

mutilation, and providing women with novel opportunities to control their own lives in a male-dominated society. For female fighters, however, the changes proved even more far-reaching. In 1977, the front cast many of these reforms into law, formally banning child betrothal, forced marriage, bride price, and dowry. The marriage law also stipulated the free and mutual consent of both partners, equal rights for each, including the right for either party to initiate divorce, and guaranteed the ongoing welfare for any children. Among fighters, the law replaced the former ban on sexual relations and marriage. Fighters were allowed to experiment with sex outside of marriage, as long as their relationship was recognized by the front's administration, and had access to free contraception and sex education. If two fighters decided to marry, they underwent a review process by the front's Department of Social Affairs, including filling out extensive questionnaires, receiving counseling, and maintaining a waiting period of three months between filing and marrying (see Connell 1997:132; Pool 2001:95-98; Silkin 1989). No women under 18 nor men under 21 were permitted to marry.

In terms of traditional kinship patterns, EPLF's approach to sexuality and marriage undermined traditional patriarchal structures in which marriage enriched and empowered certain clans or lineages over others (Connell 1997:133). It also enabled women and men to marry across ethnic, religious, and regional lines without the interference of kin-based demands or taboos. The front's administrative capacities also provided leverage for civilian women, who wielded the new laws and the front's authority against abusive or domineering male figures in their families. Similarly, the front's policies attracted numerous young female recruits, who joined the front as fighters to escape the burden of domestic work, unwanted marriage, or other forms of oppression rooted in traditional patterns of gender and family (Tronvoll 1998a).

While the front's policies and praxis targeted traditional ideas about gender and sexuality, it neither drew upon feminism nor critically interrogated essentialist ideas and practices about female nature and roles. EPLF's ideological orientation certainly

recognized gender as a key location for oppression and exploitation, but condemned such oppression only insofar as it hobbled nationalist goals. Articulating its policies squarely in terms of nationalism only, EPLF did not encourage women to develop emancipatory agendas exclusively on the basis of gender unless it served broader nationalist interests.¹⁶ In part this stemmed from EPLF's overwhelming pragmatism: for a small society waging war against a much larger and stronger one, the front simply could not afford to exclude half the population. At the same time, such an approach exhibited its own internal contradictions. Bernal (2000a) examines how women's incorporation into EPLF and the front's practices of gender equality entailed the "defeminization" of women, who became physically and emotionally divorced from their former roles as domestic producers and reproducers. This "repression of the domestic" and "erasure of the feminine" throughout the liberation struggle itself, Bernal contends, helps explain the regression of women's gains after liberation.

In these ways, the reconfiguration of gender and marriage undercut traditionally complicit kinship systems by replacing their former structural authority with EPLF's. Pool (2001:97) cogently notes that "EPLF appropriated the roles which had been associated with fathers and male family members," thereby becoming a kind of paternal figure for Eritrean society. The birth of children to fighter couples, moreover, spawned the phenomenon of entire EPLF families, in which the front became the primary kinship referent as opposed to the traditional lineage. Of course, these changes did not take place without concomitant contradictions. While practices of collective childrearing, for example, cemented the front as a "family" and reoriented kinship patterns in relation to nationalism and EPLF, it also colluded with traditional devaluations of motherhood and implied that women could not be powerful in such roles. For former women fighters in Eritrea today, a return to civilian life and its domestic demands has been extremely

¹⁶ These issues will be explored later in the dissertation, when I address the National Union of Eritrean Women in greater detail.

difficult, with much of society -- including male ex-fighters -- now viewing them as insufficiently feminine according to traditional standards (Bernal 2000a).

The idiomatic appropriation of kinship in EPLF is not uncommon for nationalist movements, as I have already indicated (and as many scholars have also pointed out). Nor is it alien to any number of possible imagined communities, as Herzfeld (1997:5) notes: “Perhaps people everywhere use the familiar building blocks of body, family, and kinship in order to make sense of larger entities.” The EPLF’s usage of family, kinship, and blood metaphors, however, carries additional significance when we recall how traditional kinship patterns were sources of division, fragmentation, and class inequality in both pre-nationalist Eritrean society as well as in the early ELF. Similarly, the extent to which this transformation relied upon EPLF as an authoritative body indicates that forming national or political allegiances may not take place simply, or even primarily, at a discursive level. The structural realities of becoming a nationalist were clearly embedded in the praxis of the front, helping establish what I have referred to as the original bond between national and political identity.

The role of kinship in EPLF’s synthetic nationalist orientation becomes even more compelling when we examine the indoctrination process among EPLF adherents. In contrast to the early ELF, in which kinship remained a dominant recruitment strategy, especially among Muslim lowlanders, EPLF fighters frequently violated kinship bonds and obligations in their adoption of political identity. That is, individuals did not necessarily join the front because their family members had already done so; many appeared to have joined EPLF (or ELF) without regard to the wishes of their families, or in some cases to evade the exigencies of traditional kinship obligations (Tronvoll 1998a). Several observers of EPLF in the 1970s noted that fighters frequently dropped their surnames, or even their given names, to indicate their primary commitment to the nation and the front rather than their families (see, for example, Connell 1997:70). Additionally, fighters frequently found themselves facing off against their brothers, sisters, cousins, or

even their own parents, during the years of strife between ELF and EPLF. These realities, into which I delve further throughout the remainder of this dissertation, illustrate the stamina of EPLF's nationalist project and the efficacy of its praxis. That men and women willingly chose political affiliation over the bonds of kinship once again illustrates the extent to which national and political identity were co-constitutive, and helps us make sense of the enduring connections people feel with ELF or EPLF today. It also helps us see the ways that EPLF as a state established an intimate presence in the private lives of citizens.

III. ii. Patterns of Political Identity

Of course, not all Eritreans belonged to the ELF or EPLF. Nor did all embrace nationalism and its goal of independence. Many Eritreans continued to identify with Ethiopia, especially those living there throughout the struggle, while others strategically adopted various political allegiances to maximize their chances of survival. Some joined the Ethiopian Derg regime or groups like the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP). Men and women witnessing the violent civil war between ELF and EPLF often rejected both fronts as a matter of conscience, although they professed nationalism in general. Aware of the multiple sacrifices involved, still others could not bear to abandon their responsibilities to their families and communities to become fighters, but neither could they endure being drafted into the Ethiopian army or the Derg's national service programs (*zemecha*). Instead, many chose to become refugees. So while ELF and EPLF may have dominated the Eritrean experience, the broader nationalist project faced further challenges stemming from the political instability of the region and its own numerous internal contradictions, rendering it always inchoate, uneven, and problematic. The endeavor to complete nationalism's historical task continues today, ever vigilant of the many real and potential ruptures within.

The question of how and why certain individuals chose affiliations with ELF or EPLF is both more and less complicated than it appears. Based upon our understanding of Eritrean political culture and identity since the 1940s, it would not be unreasonable to expect that region, ethnicity, religion, or kinship influenced, or even determined, political identity. But this does not seem to be the case for the majority of Eritreans, even if it played a role for some, and certainly in the early ELF. Scholars who have addressed this issue at all have apparently been stumped by it. In his recent study of the EPLF, Pool (2001:142) notes the important distinction between ELF and EPLF political identities but carries only briefly in his musings about how and why such identities formed and mattered. He writes in a footnote,

Over the years I have asked scores of Eritreans why they joined the ELF rather than EPLF. The answers provide no evidence for the view that the ELF was Muslim lowland and the EPLF Christian highland. Some gave personal reasons: a friend had contacts with the ELF and they went along with them. Others stated that they saw no significant difference; others that the ELF was the founder liberation movement; others that they had been in ELF secret cells.

Similar to Pool's, my own research findings revealed the often serendipitous nature of political affiliation. Based upon the historical, socio-cultural, and ethnographic evidence, it seems that historical contingency played perhaps the greatest role in determining Eritrean political identity. Interviews with men and women who became fighters with ELF or EPLF reveal that, more than any other factor, chance structured their decision to join the front. In fact, for many the choice revolved not around which front to join, but rather whether to join the armed struggle at all, particularly in areas still controlled by the Ethiopian regime. Similarly, most civilians living in areas liberated by the fronts chose to affiliate with whichever one provided protection and administration at the time. Through indoctrination and the conditions of daily life, these populations often formed enduring loyalties to the fronts.

For the men and women who became fighters, several factors played a role in influencing political affiliation. Among these were the particular time period one joined,

where one lived, whichever front happened to be closest or made first contact, or which front one's most trusted friends or relatives had joined. Only in the early ELF did religious, ethno-regional or kin identities appear to figure heavily, and only in isolated instances did conscious evaluation of political differences between the fronts factor into one's decision. And while some Eritreans insist that people tended to choose ELF or EPLF if members of one's family had already done so, as much or more evidence exists to show that families were often terribly divided by political affiliation. Later chapters offer detailed ethnographic evidence illustrating the impact of political identity in the lives of real men and women.

Whatever the reasons for joining ELF or EPLF, the origin of one's affiliation diminishes in importance compared to the consequences of it. More than a decade after independence, the nexus between political and national identity remains key to understanding the experiences and aspirations of Eritrean individuals, communities, and the trans/national nation-state. One of the main factors contributing to the durability of political identity, however, is the ELF-EPLF civil war, and the legacies it has left for Eritrea and exile.

IV. The Eritrean Civil War: ELF vs. EPLF

The ELF-EPLF civil war was fought intermittently from 1970 to 1982, and remains one of the most important, albeit least understood, moments in modern Eritrean history (see also Pool 2001:70). Given the lack of documented evidence available and the fact that it evokes some of the most painful and difficult memories for those who observed or participated in it, the civil war has received disproportionately little attention compared to its real impact on Eritrean exile communities and the trans/national nation-building project. For many former ELF affiliates and fighters who resettled in the US as refugees, the civil war is the freshest memory of the independence struggle and the main reason they live in exile today. It is also a repository of grievances that continues to

feed old grudges and feelings of mistrust, hostility, and betrayal. Contemporary calls for “reconciliation” and “healing” attest to the continued presence of the civil war in peoples’ individual and collective lives, as we will see more clearly in chapters to come.

IV. i. A War Without Beginning or End

Despite the rather well-developed historical record of battles waged by ELF and EPLF against the Ethiopian forces, much less has been written about those between the two fronts. The details surrounding its inception and trajectory remain cloaked in rumors and propaganda, leading Pool (2001:71) to comment, “It is nigh impossible to disentangle what actually happened. In general, however, we can trace the origins of the ELF-EPLF civil war to the same time period when the splinter groups that eventually formed EPLF broke away from ELF as dissident factions, around 1970 (Killion 1998:138). At that point, ELF reportedly held an informal meeting in which Abdallah Idris and Osman Azaz decided to “liquidate” the emergent opposition (Al-Amin 1992; cited in Pool 2001:70).¹⁷ The actual fighting did not commence until February 1972, however, when ELF units attacked and fought with two of the dissident factions in a sporadic series of battles that continued through 1974, until villagers in the highland town of Zagher intervened in the conflict and urged both sides to seek unity (see Connell 1997:48).

The year 1977 brought further sustained fighting between the fronts, until the Khartoum Agreement was signed between the leaderships in October of that year. However, 1977 also witnessed the alliance between the Soviet Union and the Ethiopian

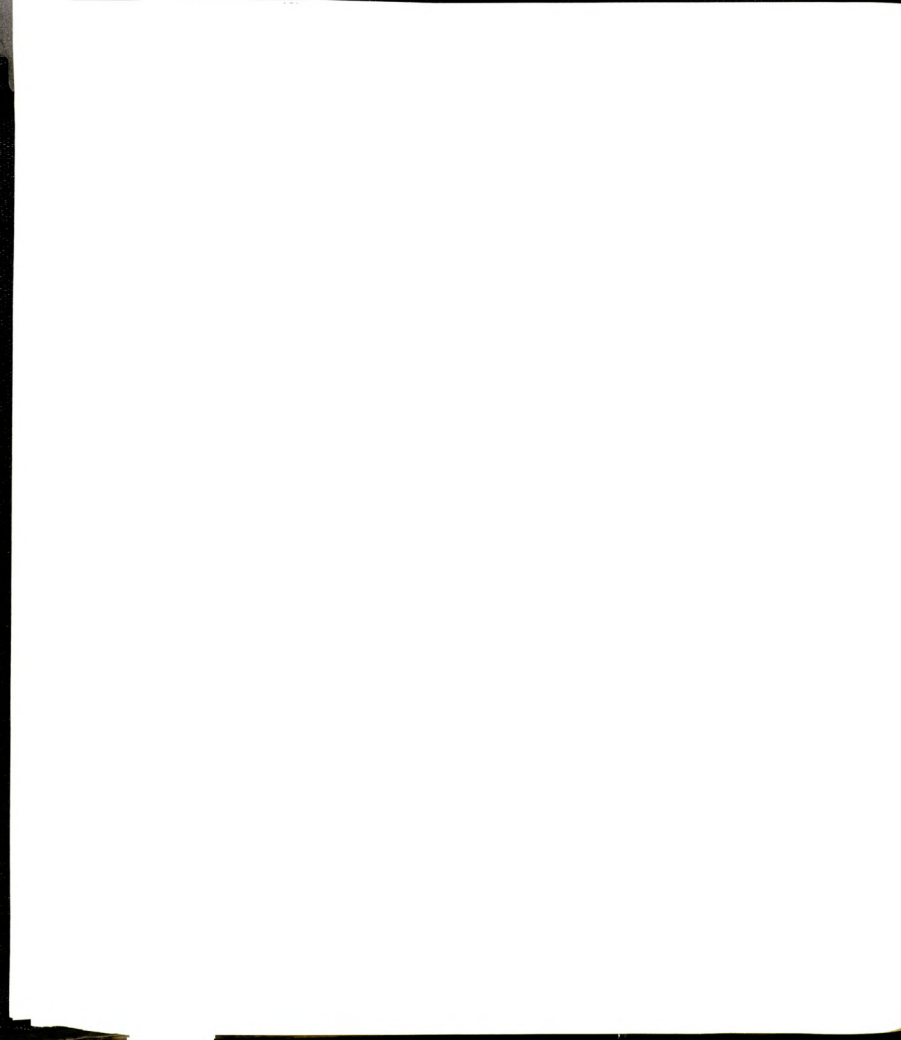
¹⁷ The decision to exterminate the dissidents did meet with some resistance among other ELF cadres, chiefly those who later formed the Eritrean Democratic Movement (EDM), another dissident faction in ELF led by Hiruy Tedla Bairu. The EDM actually emerged in 1976 and was labeled *falool*, “anarchist,” by the ELF leadership. They called for organizational reforms within ELF and advocated a change in leadership. Many EDM members were arrested and executed by the ELF leadership, while others went into exile (Iyob 1995:120). Hiruy Tedla Bairu went to Sweden, where he remained active in Eritrean politics. In October 2002 he was elected chairman of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA, formerly the AENF, or Association of Eritrean National Forces), an umbrella coalition of ELF and other forces, that oppose the PFDJ regime and organize against it in exile. See chapter six for more discussion.

Derg regime and a series of devastating offensives against both ELF and EPLF. These pressures resulted in EPLF's 1978 strategic withdrawal from the liberated areas to the northern Sahel region, a major decision that dramatically affected the mass movement among Eritreans in the US, as we will see in chapter three. One EPLF fighter recalled to me how they passed through areas controlled by the ELF while retreating from the Ethiopian attacks, and were denied respite because of the tension between the two fronts:

They [ELF] refused to let EPLF bring the wounded and the refugees and the big canons when Ethiopia came. The EPLF wanted to retain the weapons behind the liberated areas, which were in the desert towards the Sudan, and in the mountains. The EPLF base in the East was in under a big threat from Ethiopia, so they wanted to move everything behind the lines of the ELF. Then the ELF said, 'well this is our liberated area so you will not bring them here.' *And you guys tell us you are Eritreans?!* That was the final spark before we kicked them out in 1981.

Indeed, the events surrounding EPLF's strategic withdrawal damaged the possibility for a lasting resolution between ELF and EPLF. Both fronts began holding secret negotiations with the Derg regarding an end to the war and the future of Eritrean independence, and in 1980, ELF's additional negotiations with the Soviet Union created further friction with EPLF. Similarly, the alliance between EPLF and the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) upset ELF, not least of all because it affirmed the suspicion of cultural, religious, and ethnic affinity between highland Eritreans and Ethiopians long harbored by many Muslim Eritreans.¹⁸ Amidst all this tension, the Derg again launched a ferocious attack on Eritrea in July. ELF's lines could not withstand the offensive and their forces retreated, leaving EPLF to shoulder alone yet another barrage later in August. Once again the civil war flared up between the fronts, this time initiated by EPLF. Working with the cooperation of the TPLF, EPLF forces attacked ELF in the east, driving them

¹⁸ The TPLF was a rebel movement comprised of Tigrinya-speaking peoples of northern Ethiopia, who in 1975 began fighting against the Derg regime. Although EPLF and TPLF had their differences, they also cooperated extensively with one another and largely supported one another's aims. In 1991, a coalition of rebel groups led by TPLF ousted Mengistu Haile Mariam and took control of Ethiopia as the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). See Young (1997) for an analysis of TPLF.



across the highlands and west towards Sudan. Two more peace agreements failed, and EPLF at last succeeded in defeating ELF. In September 1981, the last of more than 18,000 ELF fighters, their families, and members of ELF mass organizations fled across the Sudanese border.

In retrospect, it appears that the ELF-EPLF civil war passed through two distinct phases of sustained fighting, from 1972-1974, and from 1978-1981, with the years in between punctuated by skirmishes and failed attempts at peace and unification (see Killion 1998:138-140). As Iyob notes (1995:120), both fronts had multiple opportunities during the years of the civil war to cooperate, interact, and work towards unification. All of these floundered on the hostility caused by personal rivalries, differences in political identity and nationalist orientation, and competition for control of the struggle as a whole. Within ELF, moreover, pushes for internal reform continued to threaten the leadership and weaken the organization overall. While ELF's composition was not altogether different from EPLF's in terms of religious and ethno-regional distribution by the time of its exile into Sudan (Killion 1998:140), the many competing political currents within it created problems for cohesion and cooperation. As a result, EPLF firmly gained the upper hand in terms of both the civil war and nationalist movement itself.

Although segments of ELF remained active as an opposition movement in the years following exile, the organization continued to suffer violent internal paroxysms. Various factions sought to regroup in Sudan, trying to salvage the front and keep their perspective oriented towards the overall liberation of Eritrea. But the leadership of ELF largely proved unwilling to relinquish any control despite the virtual implosion of the front. One dissident group, Sagem, favored joining EPLF and continuing the struggle against Ethiopia. Many of its members re-entered the field and joined the former rival front successfully; several of them now serve in high government posts today.¹⁹ Others,

¹⁹ Among them, Zemhret Yohannes and Ibrahim Totiel.

however, were captured by either the ELF or EPLF leaderships and imprisoned or executed for dissidence. Still others gave up the struggle altogether and turned their attention toward building lives in Sudan or abroad.

All those who participated in or witnessed the civil war have contended with its caustic legacy. For some, the bitterness of Eritreans fighting one another prevented them from joining the struggle at all and encouraged them to leave the country as refugees. Naizghi was a teenager at the time and would have been a prime recruit for one of the fronts. Although he favored independence and supported the nationalist movement, he chose flight to Sudan over the torturous sacrifices required by the adoption of political identity. He recalls:

In 1979, when EPLF tried to capture Massawa, I was in Geleb with my mom, and my brother and my dad were in Massawa. So at that time, I mean you can see *Jebha* [ELF] here, and also EPLF, *Sha'bia*. But I didn't like it, you know, the way the movement was running at the time. The civil war between the two. Especially -- see, Geleb is a very small place, and the people were so divided. In a single family, one of them might be *Jebha*, the other *Sha'bia*, the father might be EPLF, and the wife might be ELF.

Others, like Tsehainesh, found themselves caught in the center of the maelstrom, leading them to renounce their membership in any political group. As a fighter for ELF, Tsehainesh followed orders given to her, mostly performing medical tasks. When she became pregnant, the front sent her to care for fighters wounded and dying in the civil war. Her voice becomes barely a whisper as she remembers this time in her life, shortly before she went into exile in Sudan and registered to come to the United States with her husband, also a fighter in ELF. Her experiences continue to color the way she views Eritrean political culture today, using the term "civil war" to reflect current tensions between those with opposing political identities:

I was in the civil war. I was a first-aid nurse, helping whoever was wounded or dying. . . . Before the war, I got married. But then when they [EPLF] pushed us [into Sudan], I was pregnant with my son. The only choice is, you have to go to EPLF or you have to go to Sudan. I couldn't go to EPLF because I was pregnant. And I was not happy also, with the civil war. So I went to Sudan. Today, the political issues. . . . I don't care a lot about what politics is going to be, who is going to be President, I don't care. We pay a lot of people

for that freedom. A lot of people died in the civil war. I don't want to see any civil wars again.

And Asgedom, who reaches back to this moment in particular when seeking the source of fragmentation in his own life and that of the Eritrean community of Chicago, recalls even more intensely the way in which he wrestled with exile in Sudan, imprisonment for belonging to the dissident faction Sagem, the power of his identification with ELF, and his ultimate decision to resettle in the US. His lingering disillusionment over twenty years later illustrates the legacy of the civil war in the fragmented selves and communities that comprise -- and complicate -- the Eritrean trans/national state and society today.

So was it your experience in prison that made you --

I'm trying to make sense of it because --

-- consider the idea of leaving?

-- because I never would have left them.

Your ELF comrades?

Yeah. [Long pause]. Because we had been together for such a long time, since the early 1970s all the way through. Most of the time we take the same stand on politics. Doesn't matter if someone is in Denkalia, in Akele Guzai, or Barka, Senhit, Yemen. It would be amazing to someone -- we don't even call each other and say, 'What do you think of this situation, what do you think of this movement?' Everywhere we are, we take the same positions, have the same way of looking at things. Maybe we have grown together, our attitudes and personalities and behavior and beliefs have started to shape in the same trend. . . . It was discussed that I had to leave, that I could not stay. . . . See, this is what I go through all the time, for many years now, and it doesn't stop. What would I have done if I had stayed? I don't know, I always feel -- coming out of a crisis, and joining another crisis -- there was no drive, no feeling that this was a perfect way. But in 1984 we were accepted [to resettle in the US], and so we went to Chicago.

V. Concluding Remarks

This chapter has examined the emergence of the ELF and EPLF and their different relationships as nationalist liberation movements to pre-nationalist identities and patterns. I have shown how each front constructed nationalist forms that related differently to competing identities and socio-cultural patterns, and how recruits to the fronts deeply internalized their respective political identities, thus linking national identity to either

ELF or EPLF identity. I have also examined the way in which the ELF-EPLF civil war affected ELF members in particular and shaped the conditions of exile, as so many of those Eritreans who became refugees and ultimately resettled in places like the US were victims of that war.

For EPLF, the social reforms, organizing strategies, and synthetic nationalism it deployed reconfigured traditional socio-cultural patterns in such a way that formerly powerful links between individual and collective identities, such as kinship, ethnicity, region, or religion, were summarily broken and recreated vis-à-vis the front itself. For fighters especially, this process entailed a radical rupture with one's former self and a subsequent rebirth into EPLF with the front as the primary collective referent. However, while EPLF succeeded in reconstructing identities and shifting power relations, it did not eradicate the bases for differentiation themselves. As Pool (2001:196) notes, "whereas the EPLF instilled nationalist sentiments and values in its members, unreconstructed sub-national loyalties lurked in the hearts of broader Eritrean society." The persistence of sub-national identities and the incompleteness of EPLF's nationalist project, as we shall see, is reflected in Eritrean exile communities and their relationship with the Eritrean state and local society.

But it is the cleavages related to political identity that remain particularly acute in Eritrea and exile. Often subtle in its influences, at other times overt, the enduring relationship between nationalism and political affiliation continues to shape the way in which Eritreans of the revolutionary generation define the nation-state, and the way in which the nation-state under EPLF defines Eritrea and Eritreans. Having explored the Eritrean terrain in Part I, we now turn to the story of Eritreans in exile in Part II.

PART TWO

Constructing Trans/Nationalism in Eritrea and Exile

Strangerhood moves all of us, making us spit in anger or swallow in desire, but in any case urging us to act.

Tibor Dessewffy, *Strangerhood without Boundaries*

So here are the voices of the refugees, the exiles, and the internally displaced. I serve them to you with humility, I serve them raw, tearful, pained.

Nuruddin Farah, *Yesterday, Tomorrow*

I. From Eritrea to Exile

Just as the Eritrean revolution and war of liberation contended with elements embedded in Eritrean history, culture, and society, it also confronted important pressures that emerged from well beyond its borders. At once embroiled in Cold War dynamics that pitted Eritrean rebels against the Soviet and Cuban-backed Ethiopian Derg regime, the ELF and EPLF also encountered difficult questions related to African anti-colonial movements, pan-Arabism, and the goals of secular nationalism. Within Eritrea, moreover, the unrelenting upheavals of war, drought, and famine resulted in the displacement or exile of over one million people. The very struggle to define and legitimize the historical experiences that upheld Eritrean claims to sovereign statehood thus made the nation's boundaries highly permeable. In pursuing territorialization, the Eritrean nation-state became ever more deterritorialized.

Part I of this study demonstrated how exile was a central location for the mobilization and organization of the early nationalist movement, from leaders like Woldeab Woldemariam and Ibrahim Sultan who went to Cairo in the 1950s, and the Eritrean Liberation Movement that formed in Port Sudan in 1958, to the headquartering of ELF in Khartoum and the formation of mass organizations throughout Northeast Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and America. The dire conditions facing Eritreans as they contended with Ethiopian occupation, the bitter conflict between ELF and EPLF, and concomitant "natural" disasters, led hundreds of thousands to seek refuge far from their homes. Neighboring countries like Sudan became safe havens not just for nationalist activists, but also for everyday men, women, and children -- many of whom had precious little understanding of why their lives had been rent asunder.

While hundreds of thousands of Eritreans languished in refugee camps in Sudan during the years of the revolution, awaiting the day when exile might end, others found

themselves stranded in the United States. Having arrived as university students during the latter days of the Haile Sellassie regime in Ethiopia, these men and women used their time and resources in America to help build a mass movement supporting the independence struggle. Some eventually made the harrowing journey back to Eritrea itself, where they joined the revolutionary battle under EPLF's leadership. Others concentrated on building external support for the movement and sending or coordinating massive amounts of material and financial aid. Over the course of a decade, these men and women helped shape what today has become a trans/national social field binding Eritrea and exile into a single -- if not untroubled -- entity.

Yet, as the years dragged on, the disasters stalking the Horn of Africa eventually overwhelmed the floodgates. The steady stream of refugees flowing out of Eritrea since the 1960s mounted to a tidal wave in the 1980s, as tens of thousands journeyed to faraway lands across the globe. In the lives and communities they subsequently built the historic challenges specific to Eritrea resurfaced repeatedly, while others related to exile itself also emerged, once again necessitating a redefinition of Eritrean identity, the state, and its trans/national citizenry.

II. Approaches and Arguments

Part II of this study examines the construction of trans/nationalism in Eritrea and exile. Chapter three, "Transnational *Tegadelti*: EPLF and EFLNA to 1979," analyzes the rise and fall of Eritreans for Liberation on North America (EFLNA), a small but potent organization formed by Eritrean university students and workers in 1970 with the goal of aiding and participating in the Eritrean revolution. EFLNA's development alongside EPLF's helped lay the groundwork for an Eritrean trans/nationalist social field -- a set of practices and relationships designed to further nationalist goals by transnational means -- and is key to understanding many patterns and strategies still dominant today. The most

important of these is the administrative power of the Eritrean state under EPLF, and the role of Eritrean exiles in both supporting and contesting it.

Virtually nothing has been written about this aspect of Eritrea's past. While Eritreans all over the world have heard of EFLNA and many current members of the Eritrean government participated in it, only minor mentions of the organization dot a handful of sources on Eritrea. Chapter three is thus an original ethnographic history of EFLNA's mass movement in the US and its relationship to EPLF, pieced together through interview data and primary documents in English and Tigrinya. It represents the first comprehensive attempt to analyze the social experiences and nationalist activism of the earliest Eritreans to enter the United States. In this regard, it also historicizes the contemporary Eritrean diaspora by probing its foundations in United States. Through a detailed account of EFLNA's development and relationship with EPLF, I show how the two organizations together mapped out a trans/nationalist social field that captured the growing diaspora in the service of a proto-state under EPLF. I also argue that EPLF, true to its democratic centralist praxis and synthetic nationalism, came to dominate the trans/nationalist social field in such a way that exile organizations found their own potential, freedom, and autonomy sharply curtailed. The assertion of state power in exile, and the submission and resistance to it, remains important for understanding the contemporary role of exiles as part of Eritrea's trans/national civil society.

Chapter four, "*Ertra Ab Sedet: Refugees and Community-Building*," details the evolution of Eritrean communities in the US during and after the refugee flows of the 1980s. In particular, it examines efforts to define and construct an Eritrean diaspora "community" in the context of EPLF's ascendancy over the nationalist revolution both locally and transnationally. It traces this process from refugee resettlement in the US to the achievement of independence in 1991 and the renewal of war with Ethiopia in 1998-2000. It extends the arguments developed in preceding chapters to show how contrasting nationalisms and political identities have interacted with displacement, exile,

and the trans/nationalist project under EPLF to hamper the creation of effective immigrant institutions in the US, while simultaneously expanding the realm of meanings and practices associated with deterritorialized Eritrean citizenship.

One of the arguments I develop in these chapters is that the trans/nationalist process is a contradictory one that promotes and enables certain identities and practices and actively subverts and denies others (see Zabusky 2002; Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001).¹ For Eritreans, a trans/national state and social arrangement means that exiles the world over are able to participate in the life of the nation-state in new ways. On the other, the demands of that state, including its definition of Eritrea and Eritrean identity, have aggravated tensions between opposing political identities and other competing subject positions. As a result, Eritrean communities like that of Chicago have not achieved the stability and resilience necessary to meet the needs of Eritreans as US residents and also the demands of the Eritrean nation-state.

Since the 1970s, most linkages between Eritrea and exile have been largely in terms of EPLF's own constructions, such as mass organizations. Since independence, the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) has relied upon similar patterns and strategies to reproduce nationalist identity and extract resources from exiles. Because of this, institutions created in exile have been sites of passionate contestation between different populations within communities, as well as between exiles as a whole and the Eritrean state. Not least of all is the notion of "community" itself, which carries some very specific meanings for Eritreans, as we shall see. As Eritreans in the US struggle with one another over the definitions, objectives, and organization of "community," they are

¹ Working with a concept of transnationalism that focuses on political-economic integration in the European Union and the international "big science" community, Zabusky (2002) notes how some scientists experienced these structures as confining and oppressive despite their envelopment in a world of "full of money, power, and limitless possibilities." Al-Ali et al (2001) discuss what they refer to as "the limits of transnationalism" and draw upon Eritrean case material to propose a concept of state-enforced transnationalism. I will address my own understanding of transnationalism's dual potentials throughout the remainder of this study.

also critically debating nationalist identity and the implications of trans/nationalist practices. For many, trans/nationalism emerges as a hegemonic form associated with the state, one that prevents the Eritrean diaspora from realizing its potentials either in Eritrea or in exile, abandoning them to a kind of time-warp, or “third time-space” (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996) in which the grievances of the 1970s and 1980s threaten the future of the country they fought to create. At the same time, trans/nationalism also opens up important possibilities for the meanings and practices of citizenship, political-economic opportunities, and contemporary internationalist claims about democracy, civil society, and human rights which Eritreans in exile have adopted in the west. These latter concerns are addressed in Part III of the study.

CHAPTER THREE

Transnational *Tegadelti*¹: EPLF and EFLNA To 1979

What a mockery, then, to live in exile when no one sent you there. Exile, moreover, from a place that does not exist.

Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*

I. The Road Trip: An Allegory

It is a rather bumpy ride from Asmara to the small village of Haddish 'Adi, off the main road that snakes a languid descent towards the city of Dekamhare, and beyond that, the smaller town of Segheneiti. The Land Rover lurches and whines against the grinding shift of its gears, each bump sending a puff of dust from the rear of the vehicle where five newly procured bags of wheat are stacked. White-shawled women appear now and again in the distance, slight frames stooped with the weight of wood or babies upon their backs. Some prod along wiry donkeys, others turn to demurely beg a ride as we fly past. I catch glimpses of brown faces as they approach and recede, a hand holding a bit of shawl over a mouth, eyes narrowed against the dust we churn, the bluish outline of a cross tattooed on a high, shining forehead. I wonder to what unseen village they travel and for how long they have walked like this, along the edge of what seems deceptively like nowhere.

I am riding with Stefanos Danyo and an old friend of his, a philosophy professor in the United States, to the former man's natal village in the Akele Guzai *kebessa*. The two men holler to each other and to me above the droning racket in a mix of English and Tigrinya. In the back seat I pile myself against the driver-side door, grounding my body against the motion of the vehicle and competing with the wind to project my voice into Stefanos's good left ear. An innocuously smooth scar etches a wide and shallow valley from his right ear across his cheek, reminding me that he cannot hear on that side. It

¹ ተጋደልቲ: Guerilla fighters.

remains a grisly memento of his years as a fighter with EPLF and the wound that could have taken much more than his hearing during the fifth offensive.

I had called Stefanos that morning to request an interview about his experience as a co-founder of the student organization Eritreans For Liberation in North America (EFLNA) in New York City in 1970, three years before he repatriated to become a guerrilla fighter with EPLF. He was friendly, interested. “What are you doing *right now*?” he had asked, and an hour later I found myself on a road trip to Stefanos’s ‘*adi*, the village of his birth. The owner of an Asmara-based construction company, he is building a home in Haddish ‘Adi, once called ‘Adi Anisti, the Village of Women. He returns there frequently, bearing items to distribute to relatives and friends. This time it is the wheat.

As we travel along, Stefanos points to a hamlet nestled in a valley below, camouflaged by the patchy, jagged landscape. It is barely detectable in the distance save the church steeple and crescent-crowned minaret that jut toward the heavens like divine sentinels. He is talking about the value of local knowledge and debating with his old friend the meaning of progress. The philosophy professor, also an activist in EFLNA in the 1970s, invokes Nietzsche, Marx, Hegel, Heidegger. Stefanos cranes his head to hear his friend with his uninjured ear. “Eh? Eh?” he says gruffly. “All this comes from books. But what does it mean to people’s lives? I have been in the field for the last thirty years, I have seen the misapplication of these philosophies, most of them based on something out of western Europe. You can’t live by a formula. It’s not realistic.” His arm sweeps out towards the village in the distance. “You see that there?” he says. “Why do those people build their church on the hill and their houses below it? Look at that flat land over there. Why don’t they build there? Because they know what they are doing, that’s why. They build on the useless rocky land, and they save the good land for farming. Our people are not stupid. They have experience and live from experience.”

I am drawn silently into the debate between the two men as we fly along the winding roads, asphalt ribbons draped on mountainsides. Stefanos drives fast and

recklessly. His head bobs back and forth and he strains to get his left ear in the conversation and keep an eye on the road. A querulous posture dominates his impish affect. He chides his friend for privileging disembodied theory above grounded realities. The professor argues that there is no inherent truth about what constitutes progress, nor should progress be viewed as linear, evolutionary. Rather, there are always multiple possibilities at any given time. Stefanos dismisses such trifling nuances with a wave of his hand. “Of course there are certain positions which are better than others! Of course there is a *truth!*” he insists. He picks details from the landscape around us and from Eritrean history and culture to probe and contest the philosophy professor’s erudite approach. Each man is invested, each one argues passionately, each one is convincing if not convinced. I scrawl illegible notes in the back seat, tacitly keeping score.

The whole encounter reminds me of the explosive debates in 1978 between the EFLNA activists who helped wage the war of independence from the urban United States, armed largely with their intellect and commitment, and the leadership of the EPLF in the field, who sought to build the revolution using both the local conditions and materials immediately surrounding them, as well as the support of Eritreans all over the world. As Stefanos and the professor continue arguing over a lunch of *zilzil tibs* at the humble Bana Hotel in Dekemhare, I can’t help but abstract aloud how their conversation evokes those taking place in the 1970s between EFLNA and EPLF, between theory and practice, between exile and Eritrea. The table falls silent. Stefanos flashes a kindly, mischievous grin free of condescension, as if I were his own daughter suddenly waxing curious about her father’s life. “Forgive us,” he says simply. “We are children of the 1970s.” I grin back and muse my silent, serious response: But this is also independent Eritrea, the Eritrea of the new millennium, when notions of progress (or development, as we call it now) are perhaps even more important than they were back then, when the conversations circulating among Eritreans at home and abroad grow ever more intense and urgent. Are such debates about theory versus reality, truth versus perception, authenticity versus

disingenuity, ever resolved or even resolvable? And what else besides the obvious meanings do such binarisms indicate? From whence did the contours of this trans/national debate emerge, and whither do they go?

II. Coming to America: Ethiopian and Eritrean Students in the United States

Following the Immigration Act of 1965, which opened the United States to “new immigrants” from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East (see Foner 1987; Portes and Rumbaut 1996), small numbers of Ethiopians -- Eritreans among them -- began arriving largely for purposes of higher education. Most came via Addis Ababa, though their hometowns were often elsewhere. Although Ethiopia began sending university students abroad as early as the 1940s, during the restoration of Emperor Haile Sellassie’s regime following the Italian occupation of 1935-1941, by the mid-1960s more than one thousand per year were enrolled in western universities. In 1970 the largest group was in the United States, numbering more than 700 (Balsvik 1985:21; see also Zewde 1991:222). This trend was part of the reorganization and development of educational institutions during the latter part of Haile Sellassie’s reign and a key aspect of his efforts to create a loyal cosmopolitan elite that would contribute to the overall modernization of imperial Ethiopia (Balsvik 1985).

The failure of the Ethio-Eritrean Federation and Ethiopia’s annexation of Eritrea in 1961 resulted in economic and educational decline in the northern province as a whole (Ammar 1997; Iyob 1995; Killion 1997; Negash 1997). Young Eritreans began migrating to Ethiopia in large numbers for work and school. Unsettled by the political organizing and unrest in Eritrea during the British Military Administration (1941-1952) and the glimmerings of pro-independence nationalism, Haile Sellassie encouraged the matriculation of Eritrean students to Addis Ababa University (AAU), then called Haile Sellassie I University (HSIU). Once in Addis, students discovered resources not previously available to them. Student activism in Addis Ababa, then a much freer

atmosphere than occupied Asmara, allowed Eritreans to participate in the growing radicalism sweeping Haile Sellassie I University after 1965, and Eritreans were known to be among the most committed and bold activists (Marcus 1991:175; see also Balsvik 1985). Additionally, American teachers and Peace Corps volunteers working at the university or in other capacities helped some students apply to American universities and sponsored them upon their return to the US. Other students managed to secure scholarships under the ASPAU program or from church-affiliated organizations, while others came from well-to-do families with the financial capabilities to fund their sons' and daughters' education abroad.²

By 1970 a significant number of Ethiopian and Eritrean young people had amassed in the United States, many of whom had experienced firsthand the growing violence and repression associated with the failure of the Ethio-Eritrean Federation at the beginning of the Eritrean armed struggle. Maintaining a strong interest in the political developments at home, most Ethiopian and Eritrean students in the United States joined ESUNA, the Ethiopian Student Union in North America (ESUNA). The organization, which was founded in the early 1950s by a handful of elite Ethiopian pioneers, provided an early resource for newly arrived Eritreans and Ethiopians and a linkage to the mounting movements in Addis Ababa and Asmara.³ It was also a forum for the contestation of Eritrean nationalism, then called "the Eritrean question." Following the lead of the Addis Ababa-based National Union of Ethiopian University Students (NUEUS) which in 1967 passed a resolution condemning the Eritrean movement as

²The African Scholarship Program for American Universities (ASPAU) was a cooperative effort between the American and Ethiopian governments, under which the best and the brightest students from HSIU were recruited and sent to participating American universities, among them Oklahoma State University and Michigan State University.

³ Student agitation and organization were absolutely central to the processes of social change that culminated in the fall of Haile Sellassie's imperial regime during the 1974 revolution. The history of student activism in Eritrea and Ethiopia is fascinating but beyond the scope of this chapter. See Balsvik (1985).

“reactionary and sectarian,” ESUNA adopted a similar anti-Eritrean position at its Congress in 1969 (AESNA/AEWNA 1978:189; Balsvik 1985:383).⁴

Among the membership of ESUNA, which included many Eritreans (some in executive leadership positions), factions soon arose around the Eritrean question and other issues associated with class and ethnicity in Ethiopia.⁵ The situation came to a head in late December 1970. On December 16 of that year, the Ethiopian army massacred over one thousand peasants and workers near the Eritrean city of Keren as it attempted to subdue the ELF’s “Arab-led insurgency” (Pateman 1990:120). The atrocities committed against the villagers in and around Keren, which included mass executions in churches and mosques, provoked a potent response from the small number of Eritrean students in the US. When it became clear that ESUNA would not condemn the killings out of its reluctance to indirectly endorse the ELF or the Eritrean struggle in general, Eritrean students all over the country began abandoning the organization. Abeba Habtom, who was one of less than a half-dozen Eritrean women studying in the United States in 1970, recalls her reaction -- and that of her colleagues -- following the massacres at Keren:

I called New York, and I asked them [ESUNA leaders] if we were going to have some kind of demonstration, being an ESUNA member. And they said no. And I said, but this is not a question of Eritrea or Ethiopia, it’s a question about -- I think it was 1000 or 2000 people being massacred. It’s the massacre of innocent people, so something has to be done. But nobody wanted to do something in ESUNA. But all of a sudden, someone else by the name of Dawit Belay, who is now in New York, Dawit Belay and his group, Stefanos Danyo and some other people, they called and said we are going to have a demonstration in New York, in light of this massacre that has taken place in Keren. So we agreed, and I went. And all of a sudden, I never had any Eritrean feeling or anything, but the stand that [ESUNA] took, I didn’t like it. That really offended me.

⁴For a detailed, albeit ideologically charged, description of these positions, see AESNA/AEWNA / *Defence of the Eritrean Revolution*, February 1978, chapter 5. For ESUNA’s view on Eritrean self-determination and the “nationalities question” in Ethiopia, see “The National Question in Ethiopia: Proletarian Internationalism or Bourgeois Nationalism?” *Combat* 5:2, August 1976.

⁵ One Eritrean leader in ESUNA was Haile Menkerios, who returned to Eritrea to join EPLF in the 1970s where he became a member of the EPLF Politbureau, and upon independence, the permanent representative of Eritrea to the United Nations.

Thus, Eritreans for Liberation in North America (EFLNA) formed rather haphazardly in the days and weeks following the demonstration, which was held in front of the UN building in New York and was the first of its kind to occur in the United States. The EFLNA publication called *Harnet* [ሐርነት], or *Liberation*, later explained the organization's formation as "a manifestation of emotional reaction by Eritreans in the United States to the barbaric massacre of Eritrean peasants and workers in Keren on December 16, 1970. Its formation was, in no way, the result of an organized and pre-planned effort by any coherent group or individual, as some have claimed, but a spontaneous manifestation of the general outrage of most Eritreans at that time."⁶ However, it also reflected the social and political changes taking place in the Horn region as a whole, insofar as groups like ESUNA and EFLNA forged and retained important links to movements at home.

Within days of both the Keren massacres and the New York demonstration, Eritrean activists sent a letter to U-Thant, then Secretary General of the United Nations. Dated December 20, 1970, and signed "For Eritrean Students Abroad" with the fictitious name Fekri Selam, or "Love Peace," the letter was a petition of complaint about "the inhuman measures taken by the Ethiopian Government declaring a state of emergency and establishing a military administration over our country, Eritrea, on December 16, 1970." The students called for immediate UN intervention and demanded the withdrawal of the Ethiopian army, the release of Eritrean political prisoners, and the full implementation of self-determination on the basis of the UN Charter.⁷ The letter reflected the larger Eritrean view that the UN had failed them during the Ethio-Eritrean Federation, and therefore had a special responsibility to intervene at this juncture. While neither the letter nor the demonstration provoked much response from the UN, it did result in the

⁶ *Harnet*, vol 2, no.1, p.6. January 1973. *Harnet* was largely the project of Yemane Gebreab, its chief editor, and Kassahun Checole, who produced much of the writing for the magazine.

⁷ Letter from Eritrean students to U-Thant, Secretary General of the United Nations, December 20, 1970. (Research and Documentation Center archives, Asmara).

formation of Eritreans for Liberation in North America, which over the following decade became perhaps the most powerful Eritrean nationalist organization in the world, aside from the ELF and EPLF. As Gebremikael “Lilo” Mengistu, once a leader of EFLNA’s Chicago chapter and now a high-ranking government official in Eritrea stated,

EFLNA’s contribution to the armed struggle was explicitly recognized as one of the most important -- or *the* most important mass organization -- for the armed struggle, materially, publicity wise, and in the mobilization of Eritreans outside the country. The influence of EFLNA was not limited to North America. It was very influential in the rest of the world, including Western Europe, Australia, and some parts of Africa.

III. The Early Days: EFLNA, the ELF, and the EPLF

Following the December 1970 demonstration at the United Nations 1970, a core group among the 75 or so Eritreans who had attended it held an impromptu meeting in the late Mustafa Saleh’s Harlem apartment to discuss the formation of the organization soon to be known as EFLNA. The attendees, some of whom came from Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, decided to write letters to all Eritreans known to be living in the United States to inform them about the new “Eritrean movement” and invite them to the first meeting in New York on February 27, 1971.⁸ Araia Tsegai recalls that first letter and the context in which he received it when he was studying at the University of Michigan:

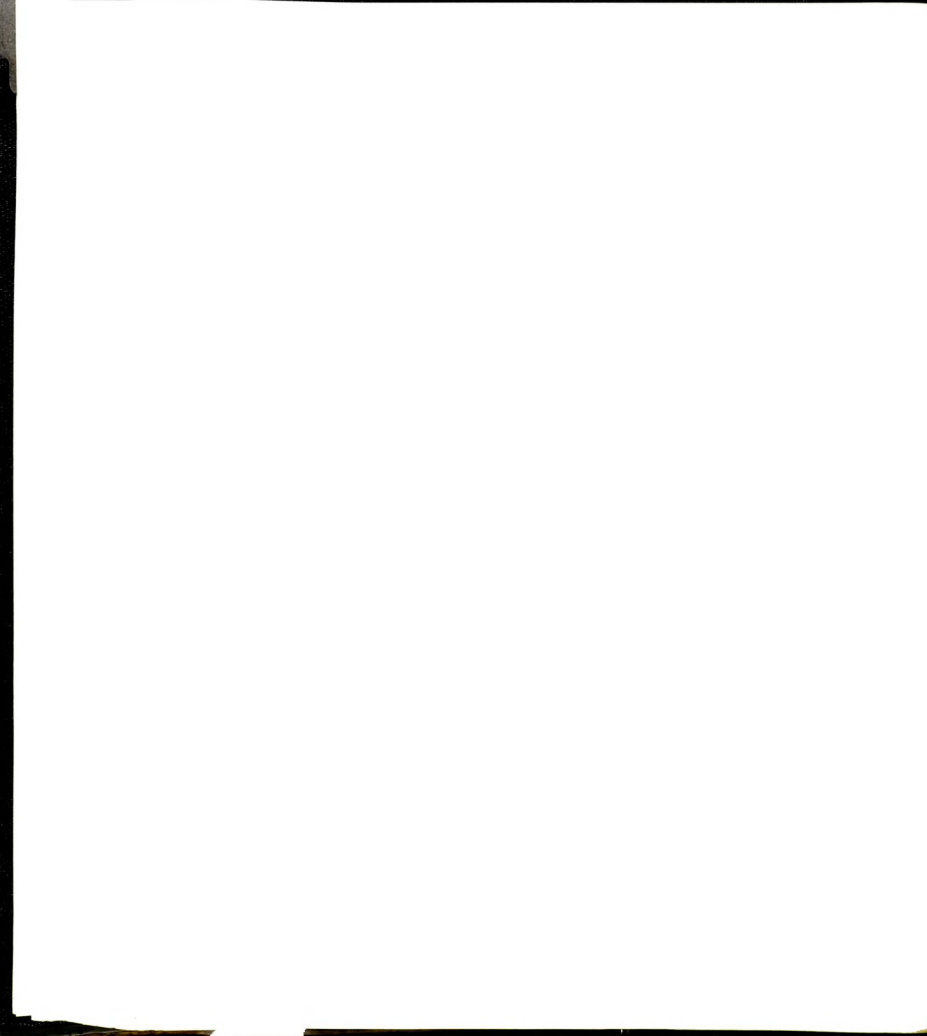
[The Ethiopians] completely destroyed a village about 5 kilometers from Keren. They killed over 1000 people the whole night. . . . There were some missionaries who were around that area, from the Swedish Evangelical Church, and these people had witnessed the massacre. And then there came a letter from a group of Eritreans in and around the Boston area that simply said, ‘We don’t want to preach right in a letter, but we cannot be quiet anymore, this has happened in December 1970, and we can’t be quiet. We have to organize ourselves, we have to meet, we have to do something for Eritrea, and this is about time to do it.’ And that coincided with the split in ESUNA also over the issue of Eritrea.

⁸ *Harnet*, vol.2, no.1. January 1973, p.8

The students initially adopted the name Eritrean Youth for Liberation, or EYL, and proposed a magazine entitled “The Eritrean.” Both were discontinued shortly thereafter when the group adopted the name Eritreans for Liberation in North America, often simply called “Efilna” for its English acronym or “Enasa” for its Tigrinya one, ኤ.ና.ቤ.አ. [ኤርትራጊያን ንናጸነት ስሜን አመሪካ]. The name was an expression of the anxiety Eritrean students felt about their own elite backgrounds versus their desire to embrace the socialist ideals of the nationalist struggle and other anti-colonial revolutionary movements to which they were exposed in the United States (including Black nationalist and Palestinian movements). Thus, they sought to create a platform that would include *all* Eritreans, not simply those with educational and class privileges. Moreover, many had discovered that life in America was expensive, and began working full- or part-time to defray their educational and living costs. As they increasingly cultivated an anti-bourgeois ideology, many students adopted a “worker” identity as well. Hence, they chose the name Eritreans for Liberation to reflect their class consciousness and desire for national inclusiveness.

The first EFLNA meeting in New York on February 27, 1971, again took place in Mustafa Saleh’s apartment at the International House on Claremont Avenue, near 125th street and Broadway. Members drew up a “working program” outlining their goals and proposed activities. These included efforts to bring all Eritreans in the US into the organization; publicize the Eritrean cause as widely as possible; announce EFLNA’s formation to Eritreans in other parts of the world; fund-raise for the struggle at home; build alliances with other progressive movements; and, most importantly, establish direct contact with the fighters in the field. They then set about pursuing these loosely-defined goals in the months leading to their first General Congress, held in Washington, DC, on June 18-20, 1971.⁹

⁹ See *Harnet*, vol. 2, no.1, January 1973.



EFLNA included numerous individuals who later went on to occupy positions of power first in EPLF and, after independence, in the Eritrean government. Some of them were among the organization's founding members. This list of "who's who" increased after 1974, when the numbers of Eritreans in the US increased. Among those who helped form and build EFLNA in its first few years were Dawit Belay, Stefanos Danyo, Haile Menkerios, Mustafa Saleh, Yohannes Gebremeskel, Solomon "Wedi Hakim" Habtemichael, Afwerki Yohannes, Abeba Habtom,¹⁰ Gebre Asmerom, Haddish Tesfamichael, Naizghi Kiflu,¹¹ Girmay Haregot, Petros Hadgu, Abraham "MIT" Gebregiorgis, Petros Yohannes, Kassahun Checole,¹² Girma Asmerom,¹³ Teklit Lijam, Abraham "Mao,"¹⁴ Andeberhan Woldegiorgis,¹⁵ Mogus and Tsehay Fasil, Tsegai "Dinesh" Tesfatsion,¹⁶ Yemane Gebreab,¹⁷ Hagos "Kisha" Gebrehiwet,¹⁸ Gebremikael "Lilo" Mengistu,¹⁹ Tesfaldet Yohannes,²⁰ Saba Isayas, Stefanos Seium,²¹ Alemseged Tesfai,²² Berhane Abrehe,²³ Araia Tsegai,²⁴ Mengisteab Yisaq, and Miriam Hagos.²⁵

EFLNA's first Congress brought together its nationwide membership for the first time. Discussions centered around the Eritrean Liberation Front, the nature of the struggle

¹⁰ Current head of early childhood education in the Ministry of Education.

¹¹ Current Minister of Information; former Ambassador to Russia.

¹² Proprietor of The Red Sea Press and Africa World Press, Inc.

¹³ Current Eritrean Ambassador to the United States.

¹⁴ Currently at the Embassy of Eritrea, Washington DC.

¹⁵ Former president of University of Asmara; in 2001, head of the United Nations Mission to Eritrea and Ethiopia (UNMEE).

¹⁶ Current Director of Protocols, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁷ Head of Political Affairs for the PFDJ and Presidential Adviser to Isayas Afwerki.

¹⁸ Head of Economic Affairs for PFDJ; former representative of EPLF in the US and first Ambassador of Eritrea to the United States.

¹⁹ Formerly Secretary and Projects Coordinator for the Eritrean Relief Association in Khartoum; currently coordinator of the Emergency Reconstruction Program for the PFDJ.

²⁰ Currently in the Ministry of Finance.

²¹ Former head of Finance for the Ministry of Defense; dismissed and arrested in 2001 as one of the "G-15," or dissidents within the PFDJ Central Committee.

²² Head of the PFDJ's Eritrean Historical Studies project at the Research and Documentation Center, Asmara.

²³ Current Minister of Finance.

²⁴ Director of the Housing and Commercial Bank of Eritrea, Asmara.

²⁵ Former director of Eritrean Cinema; arrested in 2001 for suspected dissidence and connection with the G-15.

under its leadership, and the internal splits that preceded the formation of the EPLF.²⁶ In the months leading up to the Congress, EFLNA had tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully to establish contact with ELF in the field. However, one founding EFLNA member, Naizghi Kiflu, had retained personal contact with ELF through one cadre in particular, a fighter named Tuku'e Yihdego who had joined the Eritrean Liberation Movement in Port Sudan in 1959 and later helped recruit members clandestinely in Asmara (Killion 1998:412). For his part, Naizghi Kiflu had lived and studied in the Soviet Union for several years before coming to the US, and in many ways belonged to a different generation than the younger EFLNA members. Like Tuku'e, he had been involved in the Asmara student and worker strikes of the 1950s and was directly influenced by figures like Woldeab Woldemariam, Ibrahim Sultan, and the ELM itself. He therefore possessed firsthand knowledge of the early nationalist movement that younger EFLNA members did not share. His compatriots recall him as a domineering figure whose inside connection with ELF and regular correspondence with Tuku'e Yihdego afforded him a kind of power and control within EFLNA.

At the first Congress, Naizghi Kiflu read to the group from one of Tuku'e Yihdego's letters. The letter affected those present quite intensely, not least of all because Tuku'e had just been killed by ELF fighters after joining the emergent EPLF. A confused urgency about which faction to support took hold. Few people understood what was happening inside ELF and were not yet familiar with the emergent EPLF under Isayas Afwerki and Ramadan Mohammed Nur. Indeed, in later years, EFLNA confessed that "Even though hardly sufficient information was available on these conditions, there was a tremendous urge within the organization to affiliate itself directly with one group or another."²⁷

²⁶ *Harnet*, vol 2, no.1, January 1973.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

If EFLNA members lacked information and understanding about the ELF and the factions forming within it, it was not for lack of initiative. Despite their repeated requests for information, ELF did not respond. Some EFLNA members advocated remaining independent from any group in Eritrea, at least until the situation clarified. Others, some of whom had been classmates of Isayas Afwerki's in either Asmara or Addis Ababa, felt an immediate connection to EPLF. Confusion prevailed and EFLNA nearly split into two camps over the issue. For Araia Tsegai, the desire to remain unaffiliated, to watch and wait for awhile, stands out in his mind:

EFLNA had the first meeting if you can call it that, to say what can we do, what should we do, how should we approach the situation. And then by that time, the EPLF was already a force. So the idea was, okay, we are for Eritrea, but are we going to get involved in this split ELF-EPLF thing? You know, nobody knew the differences with that, except the progressive ideas seemed to be coming from the EPLF side. There were really no messages from ELF, even though the ELF was more organizationally older, stable, it was writing books and all kinds of magazines At the time the issue was that we, as Eritreans, have to organize ourselves in support of Eritrean independence, and we will see later how that support will be channeled, or will be structured, to link itself with what was actually happening in Eritrea.

Although EFLNA did make a tentative and by no means unanimous decision to provisionally support EPLF, largely at Naizghi Kiflu's urging, the debate over the split consumed the organization for the first three years of its life. In the meantime, the executive committee, with Tsegai "Dinesh" Tesfatsion as Chairman, Mustafa Saleh as Secretary, and Mogus Fasil as Treasurer, sought to communicate with both ELF and EPLF. "We sent letters, immediately," Abeba Habtom recalls, "Even before that, we started to communicate with both ELF and EPLF. The ELF never answered. But the EPLF, they sent us their goals and objectives, the one called "NeHnan Elaman," [ነክኑን ልሙን] 'Our Struggle and its Goals.' It was translated [into English for wider distribution] by Alemseged Tesfai and Haile Menkerios." The response they received from EPLF and the progressive nature of the statement it sent, which was translated, reprinted, and widely distributed by EFLNA to Eritreans and non-Eritreans alike, effectively captured EFLNA's imagination.



Despite its growing support for EPLF, EFLNA wanted to understand more of the situation in the field for itself, and to that end sent a delegate to the ELF's 1971 General Congress, held in a liberated area of Eritrea. A UCLA student named Berhane Andeberhan was chosen to make the journey, bearing messages and queries from EFLNA. He made it as far as Sudan, where he was detained by local authorities. He returned to the US some months later, the mission aborted. Haile Menkerios was more successful one year later, when he visited the field on a fact-finding mission. But the repeated failures to connect successfully with ELF frustrated EFLNA and pushed their sympathies ever closer to EPLF, which had so far proven more responsive to their overtures.

In March 1973, EFLNA reprinted "Our Struggle and Its Goals" again in *Harnet*, and prefaced it with an analysis of the split in ELF that led to the formation of EPLF.²⁸ The framing of the issues reflected the growing acceptance and naturalization of the EPLF's position among EFLNA members that the class-based, religious, and regional tensions within the ELF were problems of the front's structure and ideology, and not necessarily contradictions within the "nation." EFLNA highlighted the religious, regional, and class solidarities in ELF as an explanation for the vaguely defined ideological differences between the fronts. It associated the ELF in general and its leadership in particular with Islamic chauvinism, regional and kin-based patrimonialism, and petty-bourgeois class interests. Its ideology was described as "deficient, reactionary, and sectarian," and its ties with Arab countries vexed those who advocated a nationalism divorced from religious identity altogether. ELF's ties with Arab states led to charges of "narrow nationalism" and "Arabism." In contrast, EFLNA presented EPLF as the antithesis of ELF: explicitly multicultural, religiously inclusive, anti-regionalist or

²⁸ *Harnet*, vol 2, no 3, March 1973.

anti-patrimonial, and thoroughly mass-based, and therefore progressive, democratic, and revolutionary.

EFLNA's early analysis of the split between ELF and EPLF actively reproduced the discourse of EPLF, although the organization continued to assert itself as analytically removed and objective. But EFLNA had arrived at such a position only after much internal turmoil, part of which stemmed from the fact that many Eritreans arriving between 1971 and 1975 had developed strong sympathies with ELF at home. For despite EPLF's emergence in 1970-1973, ELF remained the dominant face of the liberation struggle. New arrivals to the US were much less familiar with EPLF, hostile towards the split and the ensuing civil war, and resistant to criticisms of ELF. Hagos "Kisha" Gebrehiwet remembers feeling bitterly offended by EFLNA's obvious goal of converting newly arrived Eritreans to the EPLF position. He recalls,

I was arguing, I was asking them why should EPLF be separated from ELF, why don't they fight inside the organization to change the situation? Even though I agreed there were a lot of things wrong inside ELF, why the split? . . . But it was exposure to a lot of details that I didn't know and that I had no way of knowing, what was going on within ELF.

Similarly, Charlie Berhane had been a strong supporter of ELF while at the University of Asmara. When he won a soccer scholarship to Howard University and first met EFLNA activists in Washington, DC, Naizghi Kiflu convinced him of EPLF's more progressive line. He acknowledges, however, that had he stayed in Eritrea, he may well have remained within the ELF. This dynamic repeated itself again and again as new waves of pro-ELF Eritreans arrived only to experience both a dramatic surge in nationalism and a conversion of political identity in the United States.

In the ensuing years, as the split between ELF and EPLF deteriorated into civil war and propaganda campaigns, EFLNA clearly supported EPLF but also tried to remain open to ELF. The relationship between EFLNA and EPLF entailed its own complications as well. Communication was spotty and months could pass with no word from the field. Tiny pieces of information -- such as the successful theft of a few typewriters from a

school by EPLF fighters, for example -- generated massive excitement in EFLNA. Letters sent by EFLNA to EPLF frequently went unanswered. Gebrekidan Gebrezghier remembers,

There was no frequency to the contact with EPLF . . . we would get something from the field, any information, any, *any*, and it used to be a morale boost to the development of the organization. There was always encouragement, and I think the men [sic] in the field were getting encouragement from us as much as we were getting it from them. So it was very complementary. It was very genuine.

Then, in 1973, new confusion about EPLF arose. EPLF's harsh response to the dissident movement *Menka'* (see Chapter Two) astonished many EFLNA activists, raising questions about the putatively democratic nature of the front. Those *Menka'* members who were executed had many friends and former classmates within EFLNA, and the incident disillusioned more than a few. Their concerns were only vaguely allayed when Tsegai Dinesh traveled to Aden, Beirut, Cairo, and Sudan to meet with EPLF leaders. In Aden he met with Isayas Afwerki and Mesfin Hagos, who offered their explanations of the *Menka'* incident. Dinesh carried the news back to EFLNA with a heavy heart, but conveyed Isayas Afwerki's wish that the incident be kept quiet.

This intolerance for different political currents would arise again and again throughout the EPLF's lifetime, including after independence. Neither EFLNA nor any other Eritrean organization was spared from it, although the distance between Eritrea and exile afforded a modicum of power and leverage for the transnational *tegadelti* who persisted in questioning the EPLF nearly as often as they obeyed and supported it. Those who left EFLNA to become fighters in the field realized the power of this distance most acutely, as we will see later. Looking back now, some see EPLF's intolerance for differences as a crucially underappreciated distinction between it and ELF, expressed by this longtime EFLNA activist and EPLF supporter:

I think we lacked a lot of information about the ELF, because we didn't get it directly from the ELF. I think the problem with ELF was much more complex. There were different political currents in the ELF. To a certain extent I think the ELF was more tolerant of

those different political currents as compared to EPLF. And that's why you see all those different ideas. But in a military confrontation of that intense situation, you always -- all the political currents that were tolerated, they became more of a weakness . . . [in] a fighting organization you need a military type of discipline, you have to have a command structure that is highly centralized and highly disciplined, and then you become very effective.

Thus, the impact of EPLF's synthetic nationalism versus ELF's pluralist one were already becoming apparent, even within the US Eritrean movement. This trend, and EPLF's deterritorialized administrative power, increased in the years to come, constraining EFLNA's ability to challenge EPLF and laying durable foundations for the trans/national social field.

IV. Small Axe: The Power and Autonomy of EFLNA, 1971-1977

IV. i. Building the Movement

In 1971 Woldeab Woldemariam, Osman Saleh Sabbe, and Taha Mohamed Nur journeyed to New York on a delegation to the United Nations, their mission to petition for Eritrea's self-determination. There they met with the small but eager group of EFLNA activists, once again in Mustafa Saleh's apartment. Through intimate discussions with the three leading nationalists, the students gained a clearer understanding of the issues within ELF, the formation of EPLF, and the way in which their organization could better support the independence movement as a whole. Observing informal debates between Woldeab Woldemariam and Osman Saleh Sabbe in particular encouraged the students to seriously consider EPLF's merits above ELF's.

Osman Saleh Sabbe, who had essentially broken away from ELF and strategically allied himself with the emergent EPLF, was then the head of EPLF's Foreign Mission in Beirut. However, his allegiances remained questionable in many peoples' eyes, largely because of his strong ties with Arab governments. He invited the EFLNA students to come to Beirut and work under him in the Foreign Mission, but Woldeab Woldemariam advised against it. Perhaps anticipating Osman Saleh Sabbe's 1975 split from EPLF and

smelling a rat in his overtures to EFLNA, Woldeab urged the students to remain in the United States. Cognizant of the powerful location exile could be from his own years in Cairo, Woldeab told EFLNA that it could do far more for the revolution if it pursued two complementary paths: staying abroad, and maintaining autonomy from any front currently fighting in Eritrea. This included refusing affiliation with Sabbe and the Foreign Mission in favor of direct communication with the EPLF leadership in the field.

Woldeab also provided important advice on the structuring of the organization. He reminded the students that because of their educational pursuits, their work with EFLNA to that point was necessarily part-time. He explained the importance of having a full-time executive committee that could run the organization, carry out activities and fund-raisers, and collect monthly dues from its members. Alemseged Tesfai comments on the impact of their visit:

Woldeab and Sabbe in 1971 put a lot of things straight to us. We were very confused about what was happening, you know, what the situation in the field was, how the Isayas group and Ramadan and the other group were faring, what the roles of certain individuals were, strange names from far away. And they explained quite a few things to us, and gave us a new perspective. We noticed that between them there was a disagreement. When we met Sabbe alone and Woldeab alone, they would say things about each other. But they were actually trying to come as a united force. And from then afterwards things started to really begin to be clear, the muddled affairs of Eritrean politics, as it were, over there, and by 1972 we had many more meetings.

Thus, EFLNA held its first elections in 1971 to form the *akayadit shumagalle* [አካዳዲት ሹማገለ], or executive committee. Initially the leadership pattern rotated between particular cities; members in each city chose their own chapter chairman, as well as three individuals among them to lead the national organization, and the location of the central office changed with each new leadership. The first executive committee, made up of Tsegai Dinesh, Mustafa Saleh, and Mogus Fasil from New York, set up its central office in a small apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side. By 1974, members replaced this rotating pattern in favor of a permanent central office in New York and yearly elections in which members competed nationwide for executive positions. With this

structure in place and many ambitious plans, EFLNA set about activating its movement by locating and personally contacting every Eritrean in the US.

For a few, recruiting for the movement became a near way of life, and their studies receded further into the background as the movement gained momentum. Stefanos Danyo, Yemane Gebreab, and several other members were organizing in Seattle at the time and were jokingly dubbed “the Seattle Seven.” They acquired a battered Volkswagen and adopted a road-tripping technique in which they visited universities all over the country where Eritrean students were known to be, urging them to join the movement. Whether they joined EFLNA at that time or not, anyone contacted by the organizers thereafter received literature and invitations to meetings and events. In the East Coast cities of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, independent chapters also formed. Following the pattern spontaneously established by the first general meeting in June 1971, scheduled annual Congresses began drawing members from all over the country to Washington, DC once a year, usually at the end of the summer.²⁹

By its third Congress in 1973, EFLNA established its *wushtawi andeHeki* [ወሽታዊ አንድዓክዚ], or internal Constitution, specifying the structure of the organization. Four zones divided the United States into the Eastern, Southern, Central, and Western regions. Any city with two or more Eritreans could form a chapter, or *tchenfer* [ቴንፍር], and each *tchenfer*’s leader communicated directly with the executive committee in New York. Elections for the executive committee took place at the annual Congress, and officers agreed to relocate immediately to New York, where they laid aside schoolwork or any other commitments to run the organization full-time. Quarterly meetings also convened in each of the four zones, with the most centrally located large city as the designated meeting point. Other special events drew people together, such as demonstrations, cultural nights, or other progressive organizations’ meetings where EFLNA activists

²⁹ Today’s Eritrean “DC Festival,” held annually in August, remains patterned on EFLNA’s Congresses although most Eritreans who attend do not know it.

might win non-Eritrean supporters. These included, among many others, groups like the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the Black Panther Party, the Angolan National Liberation Movement (MPLA), and later the Central Organization of US Marxists-Leninists.³⁰

However, certain issues provoked repeated conflict in the organization's early years. Whereas the earliest post-1965 Eritrean arrivals were exclusively students, other kinds of migrants soon began finding their way to the East Coast in particular. Still largely hailing from the urban, Christian-dominated highlands, Eritreans of less elite backgrounds began turning up in the US by both legal and illegal means. Prompted by worsening conditions in Eritrea and Ethiopia, some even stowed away in ships as unrecognized refugees. Others came attached to employers or as domestics, only to "disappear" upon arrival in the US. As they became drawn into EFLNA, often more for social contact with their compatriots than out of nationalist zeal, the organization felt emergent rifts of class, gender, and political consciousness.

Moreover, the ELF and EPLF conflict remained problematic on several levels. For one, newcomers more familiar with ELF often needed re-education to the EPLF point of view, repeatedly slowing down EFLNA's other activities. At higher levels of the organization, the Boston chapter nearly came apart due to personal and political conflicts involving Naizghi Kiflu and Yohannes Gebremeskel in particular. Stefanos Danyo caught wind of these troubles from Seattle, where a strong chapter of students influenced by the Maoist politics of radical longshoremen and Mexican migrant workers had blossomed. In December 1972 an emergency meeting of the entire membership was called in New York and EFLNA stopped in its tracks to re-evaluate itself and its goals.

³⁰ EFLNA later published an analysis of its relationship with various international groups and movements : **ዝምድና ኢናሰኣ ምስ ገለገሉቲ ዉድባት ቀሪቡ ትግሓይኹ ዝውጽ** [The Relationship Between EFLNA and Progressive Parties, revised edition, 1977].

Implementing the Maoist-inspired EPLF strategy of criticism and self-criticism, EFLNA submitted itself to a rigorous analysis. It then published its findings in the January 1973 issue of *Harnet*, with a profile of the “three types” of members and an indictment of those who had allowed “personal relations or ambitions” to obstruct their revolutionary activism. Betraying its anxiety to establish a “correct” Marxist-Leninist analysis, EFLNA’s three types of members included those who arrived “through family bursaries or Ethiopian government endowments,” and for whom education was “a class determined privilege”; those belonging to “the Eritrean petty bourgeoisie and workers, who for the most part, came here through government or other organizational scholarships,” and who are “the most motivated to succeed academically and the most ambitious to find material success in the future”; and finally, the “young workers and others who, for some reason or another, discontinued their education. This group is generally of petty bourgeois and worker background . . . [and] has a high sense of adventurism.”³¹

These different class subjectivities had, in EFLNA’s analysis, so far impeded the evolution of a firm organizational structure and unity of purpose. Certain members were also criticized for their alleged efforts to manipulate connections to the struggle in the field for their own advantage. In particular, the authors condemned the attempted formation of a group called *m’ezuzat*, “the obedients” [መኒዛት], a few select people who intended to control EFLNA clandestinely by monopolizing inside connections to certain individuals in Eritrea.³²

Even after members aired these issues and discussed them in depth, the perceived lack of sufficient nationalist commitment among members caused consternation in EFLNA’s leadership. Some appeared to use EFLNA as a kind of “social club,” while others felt it should be a channel for those who wanted to return to *meda*, the field, to

³¹ *Harnet*, vol. 2, no. 1, January 1973, p.6-7.

³² *Ibid.*, p.9.

fight. Still others felt that it should effect actual changes in the revolution on the ground, through the sophisticated deployment of “correct” political analysis, as developed and imparted to EPLF by those with western education.³³ Indeed, EFLNA served in all of these capacities in some way or another. But the crisis of 1972 precipitated important changes as well. In the first instance, several individuals decided to leave the United States altogether and go back to join EPLF in the field. The first to depart were Haile Menkerios, Naizghi Kiflu and Stefanos Danyo. Others, like Alemseged Tesfai and Haddish Tesfamikael, followed soon after. These people, and others like them, helped nurture the linkage between EPLF and EFLNA in the years following their repatriation.

Secondly, significant augmentations to EFLNA’s structure, ideology, and activities arose as a result of its identified weaknesses and conflicts. Under the chairmanship first of Andeberhan Woldegiorgis and then Yemane Gebreab, various subcommittees responsible for different tasks were formulated. Women’s study groups began holding regular meetings in Boston, New York, and Washington, DC, and the executive committee expanded to include several new positions for those heading subcommittees. The subcommittees created in 1974 included Publicity, responsible for creating and disseminating information about the Eritrean cause to non-Eritrean groups in particular; Political Education, which gathered reading materials from numerous sources, including classics of Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism, as well as writings produced by ELF and EPLF;³⁴ and Fund-Raising, which organized things like cultural nights and dinners, film screenings, and special public lectures to raise money for the EPLF. This

³³ Ibid, p. 11.

³⁴ See for example, መጽሐፈ መደብ, ነሐሴ 1, 1977, a reading roster which included works like *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1939) coupled with EPLF’s own writings. See also መደብ ፓለቲካዊ ትምህርቲም ሚያዝያ 9, 1975, another political education syllabus which includes selections from Marx and Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto*, essays from the *Peking Review*, writings by Mao Tse-Tung, and analyses of Eritrean political history by foreign authors as well as by ELF, EPLF, and EFLNA itself. (Research and Documentation Center archives, Asmara).

committee also located material items to donate to EPLF, the most substantial of which were thousands of field jackets for the fighters.

Then in 1975, under the chairmanship of Yemane Gebreab, a fourth permanent committee formed. The Education Committee, headed by Araia Tsegai, conducted research on various topics relevant to Eritrea's revolution and the future independent state, as well as translated, published, and/or reprinted books and manuscripts for EPLF fighters and EFLNA members alike. Heated debate surrounded its formation, for many members felt that it was elitist and exclusive. But Araia effectively argued that literacy was a fundamental goal for the revolution, and that EFLNA members could produce very practical materials for the EPLF as well as political readings and translations of fiction and poetry. One example of the latter was a booklet entitled "Hassan Abdelkader, Red Flower" [ሓሰን ዓብደልቃድር ቀይሕ ልብብ] a culturally reworked version of a Chinese Maoist text detailing the dawning of revolutionary consciousness in the life of an everyday Eritrean. Another was a book of indigenous revolutionary songs collected by the New York chapter [ባህላዊ ደርፍታት ሰውራዊ መዛሙራትን]. Other materials included manuals written by Woldetsion Mesghina on how to design and construct latrines, clinics, and other practical structures. Yemane endorsed the idea and the committee became permanent within EFLNA.

The amount of material written, translated, published and distributed by EFLNA at the height of its activism was staggering. Using but a single small printing machine which Tadese Embaye³⁵ and some other members procured and learned to use by trial and error, EFLNA's literary output and distribution became perhaps its greatest legacy. Not only did EPLF fighters in the field receive the materials, but so did Eritreans in the Middle East, Europe, and other parts of northern and eastern Africa. In addition to its regular magazine *Harnet* and its Tigrinya-language political journal *Consciousness*

³⁵ Tadese went on to study print management and is now the co-founder and general manager of Sabur Printing Press in Asmara, the largest and most modern of its kind in Eritrea.

[ንቕሓት], EFLNA culled, translated, and reprinted selections from EPLF publications such as *Vanguard* [ፊተውራሪ] and *Spark* [ማኢታ]. It wrote original texts such as *Revolution in Eritrea* (1975), *In Defence of the Eritrean Revolution* (1978),³⁶ *The Role of Women in the National Democratic Revolution of Eritrea* [ተራ ደቀንስትዮ ኣብ ሃገራዊ ዲሞክራሲያዊ ስውራ አርትራ] (1977), *The Importance of Women's Participation in Revolution* [ኣገዳስነት ውድብ ደቀንስትዮ ኣብ ሰውራ] (1978), and others. Beginning in 1977 EFLNA also began reprinting all EPLF materials ever published for redistribution in North America and Europe. They obtained copies of all texts used in the field, some of them originally written in Russian, Vietnamese, or Chinese, and reproduced and distributed abroad the Tigrinya translations done by EPLF. Some texts had to be re-typeset altogether. EFLNA members also produced original studies about Eritrea's resources and economic potentials, many of them as Ph.D. dissertations, and constructed detailed lists of practical skills, training, and interests that EFLNA members could apply to the revolution, which were submitted to the EPLF leadership.³⁷

All of these written materials were integral parts of EFLNA's political education dimension, a rigorous program designed to alter historical and class consciousness and shape revolutionary nationalism. The EPLF used similar techniques, although given the high rates of illiteracy in Eritrea, only a select group of cadres -- "organic intellectuals" as it were (Gramsci 1971) -- received advanced training. They then transmitted their knowledge in ways the rank-and-file fighters and civilians could grasp and put into practice through a process I have elsewhere termed the construction of nation-history (Hepner 2000; see also Pool 1998, 2001; Connell 1993). Written materials were therefore central to both EPLF's and EFLNA's strategies. Indeed, as Anderson's (1991) seminal

³⁶ A cooperative effort among members and the Wisconsin chapter in particular, but reportedly penned mostly by Yemane Gebreab, Gebremikael "Lilo" Mengistu, and Petros Yohannes, building upon an earlier paper co-written by Alemseged Tesfai and Lilo in Madison, Wisconsin. Other major contributors included Paulos Tesfagiorgis and Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis.

³⁷ See for example, letter from the Education Committee regarding the general report on labor and academic skills, 1977 (Research and Documentation Center archives, Asmara).

work on the origins and spread of modern nationalism first pointed out, widely-distributed written materials are a constitutive feature of real or putative nations. The simultaneous consumption of the same ideas in the lingua franca of a group of people generates a sense of “we-ness” and common experience among all who engage in the act. Both EPLF and EFLNA deployed this technique extensively within their ranks and via the trans/national social field evolving between them. They often relied upon each other for a steady stream of political writings and readings. Just as for the fighters in the field, political education sessions occupied a pivotal place in EFLNA’s regular activities and its ideological connection with EPLF.

In 1975 the link between EFLNA and EPLF strengthened considerably. The closer relationship developed partly due to increased visits by EFLNA delegates to the field, as well as Osman Saleh Sabbe’s departure from EPLF and alleged looting of the front’s financial resources. Strapped for resources, EPLF made strong overtures to EFLNA, asking for financial assistance in particular. Already many EFLNA activists had quit school in order to work several jobs to raise money for EPLF. Often living eight or ten to a single apartment, members dedicated all of their time and the majority of their resources to support the struggle at home.

For the “workers” in EFLNA, earning money as members of the urban proletariat provided prestige in the organization and a competitive edge on to the “bourgeois intellectuals” who concentrated on political philosophies and education. As EFLNA adopted more and more rigorous anti-bourgeois positions, it demanded that its members shed all vestiges of privilege from their lives and consciousness. Literally putting its money where its mouth was, EFLNA raised, on average, over \$200,000 per year and sent it directly to EPLF.³⁸ With an active membership of perhaps five hundred people at its height, this averaged about \$4,000 per person per year, raised purely for EPLF.

³⁸ Equivalent to about \$1,137,527 today.

Within EFLNA, however, the pressures on individuals from different backgrounds intensified. EPLF's financial needs and the niche created for those without education shifted some of the prestige off students and onto workers. While students continued to produce literature and shoulder political education tasks, the revolutionary philosophies they learned and taught contradicted their position as elite intellectuals. A growing anti-intellectualism in the movement coincided with the intensification of EFLNA's bond with EPLF and created intense pressures within the organization.

IV. ii. Consciousness and Contradiction in EFLNA

As EFLNA entered a period of organizational maturity between 1974 and 1977, marked by its closer contact with EPLF, its structure, strategy, and ideology became increasingly attuned to the front's. Although the organization remained formally autonomous, an emergent submissiveness to the front created tensions among different sectors of EFLNA. Many members clearly valued and guarded EFLNA's autonomy, fearing they would lose control of their own activities and their egalitarian relationship with the EPLF leadership if they formally affiliated with the front and came under its control. Others, however, desired even greater participation in the revolution and saw complete synchronization with EPLF as the best means to achieve it.

The advantages of autonomy were not lost on many EFLNA activists. Remaining close but apart from EPLF gave EFLNA the chance to debate and disagree with the EPLF leadership in a way that no other organization in Eritrean history has been able to do as effectively since. Although there is a tendency today to view EFLNA as an instrument of EPLF, for most of its life it retained an independent spirit and identity. Within its ranks flowed different political currents, class identities, gendered experiences, and ideas about how to define the nation and build towards a future state. And although the structure of EFLNA tended more and more towards centralization, with a handful of people



conducting communication with EPLF, that handful changed from year to year and traveled to and from the field regularly.

In letters exchanged back and forth between the EFLNA and EPLF leaderships, usually via the front's offices in Khartoum and Aden, and later Rome, EFLNA often asked EPLF to account for certain political positions it published in the pages of *Vanguard* or *Spark*, or to further clarify tactical strategies it adopted.³⁹ EFLNA did not blindly accept all that EPLF did and said. As Tekle Woldegabriel remembers: “[EFLNA] hoped it would be the source of intellectual support for EPLF, and it had a lot of international support [too] Because of this EPLF looked to EFLNA as almost part of the leadership, a kind of partner. And this created the idea that we were equal to, if not better than, the EPLF.”

However, the anti-intellectual current in EFLNA and internal pressures to reproduce EPLF's mass-based strategy and consciousness encouraged a backlash against EFLNA's origins in the elite student movements of Asmara and Addis Ababa. Additionally, the deployment of EPLF's class analysis within EFLNA heightened anxieties and competitive tensions between activists who argued that class backgrounds determined revolutionary consciousness. Finally, problems arose around the way in which some EFLNA activists engaged with internationalist philosophies and drew upon their experiences of race and gender in the US, while others cultivated a narrower, nativistic focus on EPLF's synthetic nationalism.

As a result of these developments, the philosophical, heady aspects of EFLNA's relationship with EPLF and its ability to challenge the front's leadership and strategy

³⁹ See, for example, ደብዳቤ ገቢ.ሓ.ሓ.አ ሜዳ ካብ አካዖዲት ኮም ኤ.ና.ቤ.አ. [Letter to EPLF in the field from EFLNA executive committee, November 29, 1976], stating “we have some criticisms of the latest issues of Vanguard and Spark, especially Vanguard, because it seems to us that it is an official bulletin but doesn't reflect the development of the people's front.” (Research and Documentation Center archives, Asmara).

diminished. Internal pressures to conform to EPLF's ideology and to live as much as possible like the fighters in the field intensified. As one member put it,

For those who didn't go to college, the most crucial thing was to work and collect all the money you have and send it to the field, but not to raise any kind of critical issues or question EPLF. . . . [For] those of us who were students, the [financial] contribution you could make was little. But your contribution, your participation, became evaluated through the money you donated, not through your critical thinking.

As more EFLNA students dropped out and adopted worker identities, the intellectual power and autonomy of EFLNA as a whole subsided. Some members, like Gebrekidan Gebrezghier, pushed for EFLNA to become a workers' association instead of a student one. He recalls how the adoption of EPLF's class analysis and nationalist orientation shaped EFLNA's internal relations and activities in the late 1970s:

And then the intelligentsia, the intellectuals as such, did not even come to the meetings, with the exception of a very few. Because we used to call them 'bourgeois nationalists' and all that shit -- we used to vilify them, 'they are bourgeois,' and all that. So they didn't even come to the meetings at that time. So whoever was a member of Enasa was by my definition a proletarian, you know, a worker, the masses. But there were also a few intellectuals, and their contribution was excellent.

The erosion of EFLNA's intellectual autonomy corresponded to its enhanced role as a financial and ideological support system for EPLF. It also coincided with EPLF's emphasis on self-reliance. As a necessary and pragmatic policy adopted to cope with the front's isolation, self-reliance included harnessing the resources of the national "selves" abroad. Indeed, Article 9 of the EPLF's 1977 *National Democratic Program* stated the front's intention to "organize Eritreans residing abroad in the already formed mass organizations so they can participate in the patriotic anti-colonial struggle" (see also Compton 1998).⁴⁰ This participation, however, was predicated upon compliance and obedience to EPLF among those constituents.

As EFLNA became more integral to EPLF's strategy, conformist pressures mounted. Active members worked harder to prove their loyalty to EPLF and to one

⁴⁰ *National Democratic Program of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front*, January 1977, p. 34.

another and demanded the same sacrifices of others irrespective of their individual experiences and goals. As a result of these pressures, existing differences among members' subjectivities once again became faultlines in the organization. Instead of addressing them openly, however, EFLNA glossed over these conflicts as relatively insignificant given the urgency of nationalist goals. Some Eritreans therefore experienced EPLF's nationalism and EFLNA's adoption of it as stifling and limiting. For example, those who did not really want to participate in the movement felt they had no choice lest they get branded traitors to the nation, while women found that all gender issues, including inequities within EFLNA, simply could not be addressed beyond the focus on national liberation. One reluctant recruit, thinking he had left "politics" behind in Eritrea, recalls his shock at discovering its greater importance in the US:

In your mind you say, 'everything's behind me now . . . politics is behind me. That's all I need to do now, is think for myself, that's all I want to be, that's what my parents wished for me to be.' So when I came here, my uncle said we have to go to a meeting on Sunday. I said, 'What meeting?' He said, 'The Eritrean meeting.' I said, 'Excuse me? I'm not going! I didn't come here for politics!' He said, 'You cannot even say that! You are going to be really, really expelled from the society! Eritrea depends on us, and if you don't go to the meeting you are signing your life away from the society.' I said, 'What do you mean? Don't tell me that. I'm not going to any meetings of any politics.' He said, 'You better think about it, because you are going.' I said, 'Well, what am I going to do? I am here, I am Eritrean, but I know nothing. Okay let me go.' So we go over there, and as I said, I never understood politics! They talk about politics, and it's in my language . . . [but] believe it or not, more than half of it I would not understand, the terms they use, the political slogans, those kind of things. There is a thing about criticism and self-criticism. Every time, my name and [my friend's] name comes up, because we don't answer, we don't participate. I was even suspended at one point . . . Well, it was a good experience, but hell for us.

Some EFLNA women also felt frustrated by the perceived contradictions between the revolutionary ideal of women's liberation and the practices of EFLNA itself. While the organization did break the linkage between gender and certain role-related behaviors, encouraging men to take up domestic tasks and women to debate politics, power dynamics between men and women did not fundamentally change. Women's study groups within EFLNA emphasized the same political education as the rest of the

organization and did not engage many broader feminist ideas, although EFLNA as a whole purportedly advocated women's emancipation. And while men took up cooking and cleaning when it came their turn to provide for the rest of the group, former female EFLNA activists note that over time, even these duties devolved back to women.

Similarly, as EFLNA members married and started families, women's political participation became more difficult as their domestic burdens increased. In addition to minding children, women were also expected to help plan and manage events, cutting down on their ability to substantively participate in them. Moreover, women were largely excluded from positions of power in the organization. Throughout EFLNA's nine year history, only one woman, Abeba Habtom, ever served on the executive committee. Commenting on male dominance generally, she noted, "Eritrean women, they entirely accept whatever men tell them to do. And let me assure you, men, regardless of their sensitivity to the gender issue, that male chauvinism, when it comes to the practical daily life, remains with them. And they enjoy that. It really affected us, even in the armed struggle."

EFLNA women also found it difficult to maintain control over their own activities and were discouraged by the male leadership from addressing gender oppression or patriarchy unless in the context of national liberation. As a result, Eritrean women made few, if any, practical or ideological connections with American feminist movements. As noted in Chapter Two, feminism had little or nothing to do with EPLF's rhetoric of emancipation within nationalism, whose class-based logic purported to eliminate other forms of social inequality, including gender oppression (Bernal 2000). EFLNA adopted the same perspective, but raising gender consciousness in the organization proved difficult, in part *because* of class differences between women. One female member recalls how less-educated women resisted serious political discussion and rejected potentially useful aspects of western analysis, partly due to the fact that Eritreans were an isolated, nationalist community increasingly hostile towards "bourgeois intellectualism":

The biggest problem that we had, we couldn't associate -- you know, we didn't go deep into the culture of American society. It's very hard, you know. We didn't have the chance to really go into the culture of American society. . . . Most of our women, they didn't go to school. They came there from high school, and when they came there from high school they ended up working as waitresses, or cashiers, or things like that. So they only communicate within their own circuit, within the Eritrean circuit.

Thus, it was within EFLNA that the inability of nationalism to adequately address women's oppression emerged more clearly and earlier than it did in Eritrea itself.

Despite these contradictions, those who literally lived within EFLNA experienced the organization as an ethos and way of life as much as a political movement. In this way, it clearly reflected and reproduced EPLF's own moral economy (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001), which as we have seen, required the submission of all other interests, ambitions, and identities to that of nationalism. Participating in this moral economy included active membership in mass organizations like EFLNA and sacrifices for the collective goals of the revolution. Just as in EPLF, however, intense camaraderie and egalitarianism also developed. These stories are what EFLNA activists today recall with the fondest detail: experiences of surrender and selflessness, and the attainment of a kind of "communitas" (Turner 1969). For many, EFLNA's enduring legacy is not so much what it accomplished for the revolution and for EPLF as it was a fleeting embrace with the promise and possibility of genuine unity.

V. A Double-Edged Sword: The Return to Meda and Other Stories

As the relationship between EPLF and EFLNA intensified in the late 1970s, the trans/national social field encompassing Eritrea and exile took more definitive shape. By 1977, a near-constant circulation of men and women were moving between Eritrea and its numerous outposts abroad. Individuals representing different organized wings of the global movement traveled regularly to Eritrea as well as to Eritrean communities throughout the US, England, Germany, and the Middle East. But the most important

linkages were those made directly between EPLF and its proliferating affiliates around the world. Although first initiated by Eritreans abroad in the early 1970s, and EFLNA in particular, the latter part of the decade (and the one following it) also included tours by EPLF representatives to Eritrean communities and organizations around the world. Illustrative of what Smith and Guarnizo (1998) call “transnationalism from below,” these direct contacts cemented relations between the front and the increasing number of its supporters held in exile by the war at home.

However, the trans/nationalization of the Eritrean revolution also introduced marked discontinuities. In some ways, these reflected already-existing conditions in the construction of the nation at home. In other ways, they represented new dynamics produced by the imperfect suturing of local and exile identities and goals. The direct contacts made between activists abroad and the EPLF leadership highlighted the dissonance caused by trans/nationalist constructions of politics and identity. The birth of a trans/nationalist social field via the liberation struggle carried with it multiple possibilities for ruptures at the places where “trans” and “national” converged in individual lives and collectivities. Today that process reiterates itself in the relationship between the Eritrean trans/nation and the independent state. But the seeds of this troubled bond were sown initially in the late 1970s through contact between EPLF as an administrative body and nationalist organizations like EFLNA.

V. i. Consolidating Trans/Nationalism

Visits by selected EFLNA delegates to *meda*, or the battlefield, began almost as soon as the organization formed, although they did not become regular features of its structure and activity until 1975 or 1976. Approximately twice per year, small groups of EFLNA members, usually chosen from among the national or local leaderships, undertook an arduous and covert journey into Eritrea via Sudan. Funded by EFLNA and charged with recording every possible detail about life in the field, as well as obtaining

responses for EFLNA's questions and concerns, those who visited *meda* experienced a surge of nationalist commitment and allegiance to EPLF. They met with leaders and rank-and-file fighters alike, as well as observed civilian life in liberated Eritrea, recording the details of each trip for the movement in the US.

In November 1976, Gebrekidan Gebrezghier, Gebremikael "Lilo," Saba Isayas, Mengisteab Yisaq, Abraham "MIT," Haile Mogus, and several others left to attend the EPLF's first Congress, scheduled to occur in December of that year. The Congress was delayed until January 1977, so the delegation remained in the field for at least two months. At the Congress, Mengisteab Yisaq, then chairman of EFLNA, presented reports to EPLF about the EFLNA's activities. Individuals also had numerous opportunities to discuss specific issues one-on-one with EPLF leaders. Gebrekidan remembers:

When I went to the field nothing surprised me. I was imagining the field. In fact, so much so that some of us were living the lifestyle of the field while we were in Chicago or Washington. The kind of life - our lifestyle was not any better than what was in the field, and the luxuries in the United States, the amenities in the United States, we were not even part of that to begin with. We were wearing used clothes, with dirty hair, living many people to an apartment, sleeping on the floor, with no bed, no mattress. . . . Because we always said that people in the field are living like this, so why should we go for luxury? So I think we may have conditioned ourselves to that life in the field From the day we entered to Khartoum to the day we entered the field, everything I saw was what I expected, what I can deal with, because I have mentally prepared myself for it.

Early the following year, Hagos Kisha, Tadese Embaye, and several other delegates from ELFNA and Eritreans for Liberation in Europe (EFLE) also went to the field to attend the first Congress of the Association of Eritrean Students (AES), later renamed the National Union of Eritrean Students (NUES), held in Keren in 1978. Tadese recalls the feeling he had as they arrived in Eritrea. "We came in through Sudan, and I remember as soon as we crossed into Eritrea, I suddenly felt as though everything around me was different. I mean, it was the same landscape, same weather, everything was the same, but when we came into Eritrea everything looked different to me. There was a river there, and even the river that flowed on the Eritrean side didn't look the same as the side that flowed in Sudan." At that time too, Hagos Kisha and some others had the opportunity

to travel throughout Eritrea, including to ELF territory, where they met with that front's leaders and fighters. Kisha remembers:

We went to ELF and we met with them. Had a very interesting discussion with ELF leaders in that area. They had collected what they thought the best people were and presented them while we were here. . . . So they brought all these educated cadres to debate with us, and we had the whole day of discussion, just you know, politically going at one another. They were totally not happy with what we were doing, and we would ask them difficult questions that they don't want to answer. At that stage, the [ELF] propaganda was that the EPLF was a tool of US imperialism, that's what they were saying, because EFLNA was buying jackets, you know, field jackets that we would send . So they were even saying that these were jackets that came from the United States government. They even asked me -- some of them really believed it -- they asked me in the meeting, 'You guys say you send jackets. Is it true?' You know, in a way they are saying we were trying to cover what the US was doing. So I told them -- I had the jacket -- I said, 'Are you talking about this jacket? Yes, we send thousands of them, all the time.'

Such experiences helped cement EFLNA's relationship with EPLF and convinced the movement's leadership that they had made the correct decision in choosing to support that front. For the ELF, however, EFLNA clearly appeared an arm of its rival.

Upon their return to the US, the delegates prepared lengthy, detailed studies entitled *Tsebitsab Meda* [ጽብጽብ ሜዳ], "Field Conditions," which they distributed to members. The reports recorded their observations about all aspects of EPLF's functioning in the liberated areas and organized them into numerous sections and subsections. For example, the section entitled "Political Movements, Education and Culture" contained information about how fighters were being recruited and trained as well as the status of education, cultural production, and art. The section called "Mass Organizations" contained reports about the various associations of workers, peasants, youth, mothers, "petty bourgeoisie" (traders, teachers, etc.), and the Red Flowers, the children's division. Other sections detailed medical and health conditions; information and propaganda production (down to the specifics of how materials were prepared, typed, and distributed); the production of handicrafts, metal works, and arms or machine maintenance; agriculture and conservation; trade and commerce; construction; finance

and accounting; transportation; and the condition of Eritrea's natural resources.⁴¹ By documenting every aspect of EPLF's proto-state structure, EFLNA members not only felt a sense of belonging to it, but solidified their commitment to ushering it into existence.

In many ways, these kinds of details were the most desired and coveted by EFLNA members in the US. While some remained focused on political philosophy and ideology, the majority of the organization's members yearned simply to know what life in liberated Eritrea was like and how the EPLF was building a new society. As Gebrekidan notes:

People were more anxious to know about the everyday life of the fighters, how the fighters lived, what they ate, where they slept, any military activities that took place while we were there or not. . . . the current affairs aspect of the struggle. We were not too much into philosophizing. Of course, the upper echelon of the executive committee or the cadres may have been in deep discussions about philosophical matters, but the general membership was interested in the day-to-day activities of the front, how they lived, what they needed. Mostly they asked about the activities -- it could be the workshops, it could be the hospital. . . . People wanted to know about those, how they ran them, how they managed them, where did they get the machines, where did they get the raw materials, who were the experts, these kinds of details.

The reports produced by EFLNA delegates and the seminars they held around the US upon their return thus deepened the connection members felt to the struggle and gave them tasks to accomplish that could meet the EPLF's specific needs.

By and by, EPLF began specifying which needs to meet and when, and returned reports to EFLNA explaining how the funds they raised were put to use. At other times, EFLNA initiated specific projects with the approval of EPLF, such as "Radio Liberation," a plan to install a radio station in the liberated areas. Radio Liberation later became *Dimtsi Hafash* [ድምጽ ላላሽ], Voice of the Broad Masses, which today remains the most

⁴¹ See, for example, ጸጸብ ሚዲያ, ታላላቅ 1976 - ጥሪ 1977 [Field Conditions report by EFLNA, December 1976-January 1977]; ጸጸብ ሚዲያ, ሐምሌ 7, 1978 [Field Conditions report by EFLNA, July 7, 1978]; ጸጸብ ሚዲያ, ሰኔ 1981 [Field Conditions Report by AESNA, June 1981, from observations made March 26, 1981 - May 20, 1981]. (Research and Documentation Center archives, Asmara).

accessible source of government-produced information for Eritreans at home.⁴² Again funded by EFLNA's efforts, Yemane Gebreab, Girma Asmerom, and the late Petros Yohannes traveled to the field in 1977 and successfully carried out its design and implementation over the next two years. They were followed later by Yosief Tesfamikael, a graduate of the Detroit Institute of Technology, who became the station's first full-time radio technician in the field.

V. ii.. Trans/Nationalism and Its Discontents

In terms of ideological and philosophical issues, however, EFLNA's visits to the field often caused more consternation than clarity. At these moments the yawning gaps between theory and practice became obvious and frequently characterized the respective positionalities of Eritreans in exile versus those in the field. Drawing upon their education and detailed study of Left political philosophy, as well as their knowledge of international movements and struggles beyond Eritrea's, some EFLNA activists pressured the EPLF leadership to account for its approaches within those broader contexts. The discussions were often related to obscure matters within revolutionary politics, such as whether or not Hoxha's Albanian model applied to Eritrea, or whether the Soviet Union, then backing Ethiopia against Eritrea, exhibited "socialist revisionism." At these moments, EFLNA flexed its autonomy most clearly. One activist remembers how EFLNA inculcated a fearless sense of egalitarianism with the EPLF leadership, creating conditions for otherwise impossible conversations to occur given EPLF's democratic centralism and strict policies against dissent:

To me, the formal link with the EPLF, in my honest opinion, had both [a] negative impact and [a] positive impact in the movement. Positive impact, because it wholly, entirely enabled [EFLNA] to work for independence. . . . [And] you could openly critique -- I mean, you could balance out -- for anything that comes up within EPLF, you could criticize it and have it corrected at the right time. Issues could be tackled at the right time.

⁴² *Dimtsi Hafash* programs are also available to Eritreans abroad via the Internet.

Okay, I remember, when I first came to the field in 1977, if you remember, that was the time when revisionism was popular. In the field you cannot talk about Soviet revisionism openly. . . . I used to have so many problems because I used to openly discuss it. And okay, I can understand most of the people were in the field were from the rural areas, from the peasantry background, so it would be an intellectual discussion to talk about revisionism. But to some extent, I think it would have been much better if you had some more opportunity for seeing things critically, and also for helping others to see things critically. But there was none of that kind of platform in EPLF [except EFLNA].

At the same time, visits to the field changed the way EFLNA activists thought about the nationalist revolution. Hagos Kisha remembers how his visits to the field shifted his consciousness from abstract notions to pragmatic ones:

I stayed about six months. It was a very long stay, but by the time I went I had a really clear picture of what was going on here [in Eritrea], and with the commitment of what we have to do to help in the homeland. And maybe up to that time we were thinking of supporting, helping, in many ways, but for me personally that was a turning point, to be fully committed, and work full-time. . . . But when you come with ideas, when you want to discuss what you think, you will find out that you didn't understand certain things, because when you meet and discuss you will really understand the situation. Like after my visit to the field, as I told you, with all kinds of debates and discussions, there was no difficulty for me to understand which idea was right, because I saw what was going on.

Indeed, for many EFLNA activists who visited or returned permanently to *meda*, alternative political lines or philosophies, sub-national identities and broader, internationalist concerns diminished in importance as they came to accept EPLF's authority and nationalist vision.

Not everyone accepted the participation of exiles, however. Rank-and-file EPLF fighters also developed opinions about EFLNA activists, and the most astute often seized upon the perceived discontinuity between EFLNA's political ideas and the realities of *meda*. Some fighters had only heard about "the petty-bourgeois students in America." Others recognized their participation by the field jackets some fighters wore and the written materials arriving from the US. EPLF cadres who traveled to the US and other locations abroad also reported to the rank and file fighters on the activities of Eritreans there, including the amount of funds raised, to help boost morale. Alazar, an EPLF fighter who resettled in the US as a refugee in 1983, remembers his impressions of EFLNA in the 1970s as ambivalent at best:

Our perception of them was mixed. Okay, to some degree they are Eritreans and they are helping their front. To some degree, when they try to impose their theories, which don't work in the practical world, then they annoy us. . . . And we will say, 'Oh, they're just saying that because they are educated and they are telling me over there,' and we don't like that. So we know who they are, and the educated mentality, how to -- we try hard to handle it. . . . Not to hurt their feelings, and at the same time to integrate them. Although they are educated academically, they don't know the practicality or the reality of the field. . . . I prefer one who is not educated, but who knows what he is doing in the field, rather than someone who thinks that things will go by formula, you know?

But while more than a few EFLNA members and EPLF fighters scoffed at heady political and philosophical matters, insisting on the superiority of practice and pragmatism, these sorts of debates did not simply go away as a result of the increasingly grounded relationship between EPLF and EFLNA. They arose again soon thereafter, and remain an enduring feature of contemporary Eritrean trans/nationalism.

Many EFLNA activists traveled to and from the field multiple times, or to other locations in the trans/national revolution, often according to EPLF orders. Sometimes they did not return from *meda* at all, choosing to relinquish the movement in the US for the revolution at home. Great prestige surrounded those who returned to *meda* permanently. Indeed, one of EFLNA's goals was to prepare the most serious and committed transnational *tegadelti* for integration into the field. One's ability to successfully join the struggle at home frequently hinged on how well one lived the life of *meda* in the US, and to this end a "cadre school" formed in New York City in 1976 as the last and highest phase of preparation for return. Through a process of self-selection and achieved status in the organization, individuals who seriously wished to return to the field spent roughly six months undergoing intensive political education and other preparations for the realities of the field.

Of course, many people departed for the field on their own volition, neither sent by EFLNA nor requested by EPLF. Yosief Tesfamikael, the technical engineer behind Radio Liberation and *Dimtsi Hafash*, was one such independent returnee. So were the earliest repatriated fighters from EFLNA like Stefanos Danyo and Alemseged Tesfai.

However, such independent initiatives were later frowned upon, and both EFLNA and EPLF discouraged actions that contradicted democratic centralist procedures. The last cohort of cadre school trainees in 1978 never made it back to *meda* due to developments discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Even with the preparation of cadre school, exile activists who returned to *meda* discovered that they required re-education and consciousness-raising. While the condition of exile had been incorporated into the narrative of Eritrean “nation-history” (Hepner 2000) and nationalist identity alike, Eritreans who remained at home and within the armed and civilian wings of EPLF frequently looked askance at their compatriots living or returning from abroad. This was especially true towards those raised in Ethiopia or born of elite class backgrounds. The re-integration of EFLNA activists into the front both created and highlighted the ruptures within trans/nationalism as exiles discovered the narrower parameters of local, EPLF-defined nationalism and learned to live with the rigors of revolution.

The development of nationalist identity among EFLNA activists in the US was both linked to, and crucially separate from, the process at home. Locally, Eritreans acquired and practiced nationalist consciousness through committed participation in ELF or EPLF and its civilian mass organizations. Nationalism helped make sense of colonialism and the violence being wrought upon Eritrea at the same time that it mobilized resistance and drove the revolution (Hepner 2000). While EFLNA members also engaged in this process, their identities and goals also became shaped by the condition of exile and the alternative, international issues to which they were exposed. Life in the United States compelled EFLNA activists to think and act not simply as nationalists, but also as immigrants, blacks, Leftists, and perhaps to a lesser degree, feminists, because building Eritrea’s revolution in the US required relating its condition and struggle to other international movements and radical ideologies. At the same time, race-class hierarchies in the US prompted a tangible decline in status for many otherwise

privileged Eritreans, who found themselves drawn into American post-Civil Rights debates. Similarly, gender roles shifted as women were exposed to American gender constructions and competed with men in their educational and/or earning potentials for the first time. These new exile-induced subjectivities sometimes created powerful collusions and contradictions when they interacted with Eritrean nationalism. One example is the way in which class identities became reshaped within ELFNA by the anti-bourgeois and anti-intellectual ideology and rigorous practical demands of EPLF's nationalism. Similarly, following EPLF's line that women's liberation should be addressed only in the context of national liberation raised questions for EFLNA's female activists. Some of them felt that their male comrades did not genuinely advocate women's empowerment nor practice it in their daily lives, but merely paid lip service to its importance. Once in *meda*, discontinuities such as these emerged as former EFLNA activists were integrated into EPLF's locally-constructed nationalism. No longer empowered by the autonomy of exile, there was little to be done.

Of course, many returnees willingly adapted to locally-constructed EPLF nationalism, surrendering whatever contradictions they may have felt to the logic of the front and the field. But for others, especially those who had never lived in Eritrea or came from elite backgrounds, the process could be extremely painful. One female cadre, born of a well-to-do Eritrean family in Ethiopia, discovered that her background, the consciousness she achieved in the US, and her activism in EFLNA were liabilities in the field. It took years for her to establish trust with other members of the front, especially other women. She discovered that her gender consciousness could not be divorced easily from her class background, and although she was sent by EPLF to work with a leading women's organizer in the front, she felt held back by locally constructed notions of gender, class, and nation:

[The EPLF women's organizer] was supposed to help me so that I would promote myself, and would help other women, be a very good role model for other women. And that would

enrich the movement itself. But. . . she would put me down, 'this woman coming from the petty bourgeoisie.' To her my contribution was nothing -- was not as effective as any peasant woman -- she would make it sound like the peasant woman would be much more effective. Because if you really see the peasant woman in the field, in a way she is effective because she can easily adapt to the situation, and is a better fighter than me when it comes to jumping, running, and participating in everyday life, cooking, baking *injera*. I was not brought up that way, I had maids in my house and I never cooked. But we could have helped each other. I could teach that peasant woman to be gender sensitive and to be very strong in changing the attitude of men in the participation of women, in the role of the women. But things were not handled like that.

This cadre's experience revealed not only the discontinuities caused by the encounter between her trans/nationally constructed politics and identity with locally constructed versions, but also the ways in which the latter sought to synthesize all differences or subjectivities beneath a single, homogenizing nationalist project. Unless she shed her class background and broader gender consciousness, this fighter could not legitimately participate in the nation. Most EFLNA activists who returned to *meda* seemed to intuitively understand this or rapidly came to accept it. Those who did not, however, suffered an isolation made all the more acute by the collective nature of national belonging and the gravity of the revolutionary project.

Some ruptures, however, are more fatal than others. Clearly, EPLF succeeded -- to an astonishing degree -- at producing and propagating its synthetic nationalism. For some organizations and individuals, however, the trans/national encounter produced serious dissonance between lived subjectivities and those imposed by EPLF's particular vision. As EPLF gradually came to dominate and control the form and content of all trans/nationalist exchanges, the power and autonomy of organizations like EFLNA all but dried up. In the same way it helped initiate the trans/national social field, EFLNA also became the first casualty of its limitations.

VI. The Demise of EFLNA, 1978-1979

VI. i. Mass Organizations and the Surrender of EFLNA's Autonomy

As we have seen, student activism, clandestine associations, and mass organizations were important features of the Eritrean nationalist movement since the

1950s. And for all of them at one time or another, exile provided a safer space to organize and mobilize on behalf of Eritrea. EFLNA was just one example of this. Its relative uniqueness, however, stems from the fact that it formed independently of any existing pro-independence movement in Eritrea itself. Most other mass organizations, either at home or in exile, were actively created by one of the liberation fronts.

As early as 1966, the ELF had formed the General Union of Eritrean Students (GUES), only to see it destroyed in 1967 by Ethiopian arrests and defections (Killion 1998:385). It finally formed again successfully in Damascus in 1968. But even prior to such formal organizing, both the ELF and EPLF deployed secret associations of secondary-school and university students in Asmara and Addis Ababa to recruit fighters. Finally, at its first Congress in 1977, EPLF announced in the *National Democratic Program* its intention to create associations of workers and women as civilian wings of the movement.⁴³

The push to bring civilians beneath direct EPLF administration had been present for some time. The ELF had begun creating mass organizations in the late 1960s, and EPLF saw the obvious advantages of doing the same. As we saw in Chapter Two, mass organizations imparted to civilians the kind of political education necessary for reshaping Eritrean history and propagating nationalist consciousness. They also transmitted practical skills and knowledge, such as basic literacy and hygiene, and provided an enormous and loyal mass-base for the front as it both fought for independence and constructed a new kind of society. As the beneficiaries of EPLF protection and development schemes in the field, civilians too had an interest in becoming active members of the mass organizations.

Mass organizations also played a practical role in forging the trans/nationalist social field. Once in place in the late 1970s, they brought all other nationalist associations

⁴³ *National Democratic Program of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front* (1977), Article 5, items A and B, p. 29-31.

around the globe under direct EPLF administration and control, connecting them simultaneously to the field and also to one another. Despite its autonomy, EFLNA felt the gravity of that pull, as one member notes:

Well, you can tell that the EPLF wanted the organization [EFLNA] to be a member of the mass organizations It was organizing the students, the workers, the farmers [peasants], the women, into their own organizations inside the field. And the EPLF may have rationalized that Eritreans abroad should also be part of the mass organizations inside Eritrea. If there is an association of Eritrean students inside the field, then an association of Eritreans outside the field should also be part of that, because it had become a worldwide movement.

Indeed, as the 1970s drew to a close, the revolution had emerged as indisputably transnational, with EPLF directing the flows.

Thus, feeling pressure from EPLF, EFLNA voted at its 8th Congress in 1977 to transform itself into two mass organizations: the Association of Eritrean Students in North America (AESNA) and the Association of Eritrean Women in North America (AEWNA). The move placed the organization under the control of EPLF and on an equal footing with all other mass associations around the world. Not everyone in EFLNA supported the idea, however. Since its inception in 1970 EFLNA had exercised and valued its autonomy, even as it had aligned itself with EPLF. But advocates for joining the mass organizations triumphed over those who opposed it, as Gebrekidan points out:

The decision to remain independent was not very strong. I mean, in the debate it was 'let's join and become part of the organization.' And some of them said 'let's keep our independence.' The people that said let's keep our independence, it's because they saw the gains we can have by being independent. In other words, we can pass independent resolutions, we can think independently, and if we can think independently, then we can become more resourceful to the struggle. That was the rationale behind it. And some of the people who said we can't remain independent saw the independence as an alienation of our organization from the struggle at home. And they said, 'No, Eritreans cannot be independent -- this is our struggle.' So, there was a very strong, a very strong debate on both sides of the issue, let's stay independent, and let's be part of the revolution. And when they said let's be part of the organization, they are saying Eritreans everywhere -- whether we are in the field or outside -- we should be one, we should go the same way, we should be organized in the same manner. And the ones that said, no, let's be independent, it's because they wanted -- I believe they were thinking in terms of independent thinking without any guidelines or restrictions or affiliations to the political thinking of the leadership of the EPLF. Not the cause itself -- the cause is the same to everyone. But as far

as independence is concerned, if we stay independent, we can give more resources and help more. . . . but if you are part of the organization you can't condemn the leadership, you are bound by the rules and regulations of the front, and you have to do whatever the front tells you to do, and in that way you can't go and have an independent view of yourself.

While the decision to become a mass organization did not happen immediately or easily for EFLNA, it was also a natural outgrowth of the evolving relationship with EPLF. Perhaps anticipating what would occur, the EPLF sent Andemikael Kahsai to attend EFLNA's 8th Congress, in which the new acronyms AESNA and AEWNA were adopted.⁴⁴ Despite the reservations some EFLNA members felt, the move was accepted and Andemikael's presence for the historic decision invigorated the movement.⁴⁵ For many, this was the first real *tegadelay* to stand before them, sent by EPLF to shepherd them fully into the fold of the front.

EFLNA's leadership, however, was already well acquainted with Andemikael Kahsai. In 1976, EPLF had set up a major office in Rome, Italy, through which Eritrean organizations in Europe and North America communicated with the leadership. Andemikael was stationed there, and EFLNA's executive committee had exchanged numerous letters and memoranda with him that evidence the extent to which EFLNA had questioned EPLF's politics and strategy. In one letter dated June 14, 1977, Andemikael responded to concerns voiced by EFLNA's leadership about Cuba and the Soviet Union's backing of Ethiopia, and deflected questions they had posed regarding Eritrea's place in international socialist movements of the day.

Andemikael's efforts demonstrated both EPLF's desire to maintain good lines of communication with EFLNA while also discouraging it from testing the front's strategy and tolerance. He assured EFLNA's leadership, "That this issue requires in-depth analysis

⁴⁴ Served various posts in EPLF and after independence. In 2001, he was ending his term as mayor of Asmara.

⁴⁵ EFLNA had actually voted to become a mass organization of EPLF at its seventh Congress in 1976; the reorganization did not actually take place, however, until the eighth Congress in 1977.

and precise skill, is clear to all of us. Therefore, the necessary amount of attention and effort is being allocated to it. After the issue is completely studied, a report will be issued. However, the letter(s) you wrote were received by the office of political affairs (Politbureau). Until an answer is sent to you by the same office, you should proceed with your work.”⁴⁶ He continued on to warn EFLNA that “The alliance between the Derg and Soviet Union, Cuba and other nations is undeniable. Issuing a public condemnation of these forces at this moment, in addition to negatively affecting the morale of the people and fighters, will do nothing except to benefit the reactionary forces internally, externally and the Derg.”⁴⁷ Anticipating the internationalist nature of EFLNA’s critique, Andemikael finished the letter with the assertion that “We [EPLF] support other countries' and organizations just and correct positions. We strive to benefit from it and we are working to strengthen our friendships with them. But there is no nation or party that we ‘worship.’ We are striving to learn from the experience of others, to discern their lessons, develop and improve on them, to help us with our socialist development. But everyone must realize that we will not accept anything uncritically.”⁴⁸

At the time of these exchanges, EFLNA’s executive committee included Mengisteab Yisaq as chairman, Gebremikael Lilo as secretary, and Hagos Kisha as treasurer. Mengisteab Yisaq is remembered today as an extraordinarily committed, articulate, and passionate leader possessed of great intelligence and charismatic appeal. He was also known to be commanding, domineering, and even dictatorial. Under his leadership, EFLNA became more centralized and less democratic in its decision-making and internal policies. Mengisteab himself tended towards monopolization of communication with the EPLF leadership and, as some members recall, tended to present

⁴⁶ Letter to EFLNA leaders from EPLF organizing committee, Rome, June 14, 1977. [ደብዳቤ ንእካዳሚት ኮሚቴ ኤፍሰኦ (ካብ ወደቢ ኦባል ኣብ ወጻኢ, ሮማ), ሰኔ 14, 1977.] (Research and Documentation Center archives, Asmara).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

his own personal perspective as fact. He was also deeply interested in international socialist and communist movements and read widely in political philosophy. Isolated from direct communication with EPLF representatives, the general EFLNA membership looked toward Mengisteab as a knowledgeable and authoritative leader. Most members trusted him completely, if for no other reason than his plain commitment to the cause:

He was always in the office, and he was always reading. He was always very into it. He sometimes slept there on the couch -- he was committed one hundred thousand percent. We said, 'this guy is going to die here!' Everybody used to say to him, 'Don't you ever go home? Don't you go outside?' He was -- obsessed.

Indeed, Mengisteab became obsessed not just with the struggle itself but also the refusal of EPLF's leadership to condemn the Soviet Union, an international superpower and model of socialism for so many countries at that time. In early 1978, Mengisteab traveled to the field for the third time, allegedly looking to discuss the question of Soviet "revisionism" in particular with the EPLF leadership. Mengisteab's position was informed by his genuine engagement with certain "orthodox" notions of socialism among segments of the international Left and his allegiance to Hoxha's Albanian line in particular. His fixation on "revisionism" stemmed from his understanding of Soviet socialism as distorted by Khrushchev's "social democratic politics" that purportedly benefited the bourgeoisie, imperialism, and capitalism. Soviet revisionism was also evidenced in the superpower's support of Ethiopia's brutal Derg regime in its efforts to crush other mass movements from within, such as Eritrea's. Mengisteab became convinced that in order for EPLF to save itself from the same kind of revisionism, the leadership must reject the Soviets completely, issue a public condemnation, and strive to reposition EPLF politics according to more "orthodox" Marxism-Leninism.

But for the reasons summarized in Andemikael's letter, as well as the fact that such issues were largely dismissed by EPLF pragmatists as semantic, impractical, and therefore irrelevant, Mengisteab reportedly met with frustration. His efforts to convince EPLF that the revolution was in serious danger as a result of a deviant ideological line

were failing. When EFLNA became the mass organizations AESNA and AEWNA, moreover, EPLF's tolerance for such discussions evaporated. As an official mass organization, AESNA and AEWNA could no longer dispute EPLF's positions or strategies.

Then in mid-1978, under successive attacks by the Soviet-armed Derg, the EPLF withdrew from most of the territory it had liberated since 1975. Following Mao Tse-Tung's model of protracted guerrilla warfare, EPLF rationalized its decision as a "strategic withdrawal." Unable to defeat the Soviet-backed Derg, EPLF sought to dismantle itself in the liberated areas and retreat to its base in the inaccessible northern mountains of the Sahel region. Many civilians went with it, but others were left to face the approaching Derg army and its Soviet-supplied munitions. In the space of six months, EPLF went from controlling large regions of Eritrea to regrouping at its base. To Eritreans in exile, it appeared a horrifying and sudden defeat.

At roughly the same time, both ELF and the EPLF began engaging in underground dialogue with the Derg regarding an end to the war. ELF had traveled to the USSR for the talks while EPLF met with the Ethiopian regime in Berlin. The talks were in many ways strategic for the Derg, as they hoped to sow further mistrust and hostility between the ELF and EPLF. EFLNA activists felt confused, disoriented, and desperate about the unfolding situation. As one member recalls:

First, the EPLF was having a dialogue with the Derg leadership, in Berlin, and [they were saying] that they didn't have to have preconditions for independence, and we didn't know why they were doing that. I mean, how can you drop the question of independence? That's why the Eritrean people are sacrificing their lives, for independence! And the second one was the question of the Soviet Union, when they were bombing Massawa and other cities. . . . they [EPLF] were saying the Soviet Union is not our enemy. They were putting this in their own writings even. And especially the questions they were raising in dialogue with the Derg -- what are they doing? And these things were coming up. And at the same time when they were saying this, the withdrawal had started, so we were questioning if this had to do -- were they being pressured by the Soviet Union to do this? Because I don't know -- the withdrawal was so fast, we were unaware of what was going on, but something was going on, and we knew about the meeting they were doing with the Derg in Berlin, and

other meetings, and from their writings they didn't tell us -- it was supposed to be a secret, the meetings.

The volatility of the political situation and the desperate circumstances in the field led the EPLF to heighten its control over information and maneuver with even greater secrecy than in years past. This included withholding information from mass organizations. EPLF rebuffed or ignored EFLNA's lengthy, repeated inquiries and failed to send representatives, as requested, to clarify the developments. Gebrekidan, then a leading organizer in EFLNA, explained the situation at the time, although with much greater sensitivity towards EPLF's position almost thirty years *post facto*:

We were into the international communist movement by that time. We had political education the whole year, and at the end we held the Congress, and we decided that according to the political education we learned, the EPLF leadership was not in synchronization with the international communist movement. And. . . we demanded that the Soviet Union be condemned. And the EPLF leadership said no, we are not in the business of condemning or saying anything negative about anybody, we would like to have more friends not more enemies. But we insisted that the Soviet Union be condemned as revisionist. And when they [EPLF] said no, then we said 'You are with them, in their camp, a reactionary camp, a revisionist camp, who sides with Ethiopia and bombs our people. . . .' Of course looking at it today, we were not dealing with the objective realities of the front. The front had more responsibility to the country than we did. It was the vanguard organization, so whatever it does has consequences for [Eritrea's] destiny itself. It can make or break the struggle, whatever they do. But we were just a bunch of students and workers in North America and we can say anything we want. And we thought the EPLF can say whatever it wants also. That's why what we did was not totally correct, not right. We didn't approach it the right way. Our presentation was very immature. I don't think we were wrong in some of the aspects of the demands we made. But the way we presented it, and the time we presented it, was not conducive.

By the time EFLNA's ninth Congress convened in August 1978, Mengisteab Yisak in particular, along with other members attuned to his position, had grown absolutely convinced that the EPLF leadership was betraying "the people's revolution." Reflecting now, other active members at the time believe that Mengisteab's perspective emerged not only from his opinions about "orthodox" socialism but also from his deep inside connection to the EPLF leadership itself. As one former activist recalls, "Mengisteab, if you know anything about him, did seem to have some conviction that something was very wrong in EPLF." He had suffered especially bitter disagreements

with Sebhata Ephrem, then the head of EPLF's Department of Public Administration, or *kifli hizbi*, the division responsible for coordinating and directing mass organizations around the globe. Working largely by himself but beneath the AESNA and AEWNA organizational titles, Mengisteab penned the now infamous text *Eritrea: Revolution or Capitulation?* and published it in October 1978.

The text, whose distribution intended to reach all exile organizations and the field itself (only to be banned and confiscated by EPLF immediately), announced that EFLNA had broken with the EPLF leadership and mercilessly condemned it for violating EFLNA's democratic rights and "imposing its capitulationist view" on the organization.⁴⁹ The book charged that EPLF had "in the most shameless manner betrayed the national struggle and have proclaimed themselves as apologists for Soviet-led revisionist aggression."⁵⁰ EFLNA reclaimed its former autonomous name and status, dropping the names AESNA and AEWNA and rescinding its status as a mass organization of EPLF.

The booklet *Revolution or Capitulation?* documented the growth and development of EFLNA and its relationship with EPLF, noting that it "considered its active revolutionary work and, in particular, the adoption of a correct political line as the prime condition [sic] for creating an organic link with the revolution at home and uniting the revolutionary forces."⁵¹ Moreover, "EFLNA's support for EPLF emanated from our free will. . . . This was made clear long ago in our fifth congress when we stated that EFLNA:

...has not only the right but also the responsibility to express its views, commend or criticize, support or condemn, accept or reject, in regard to any issue pertaining to the Eritrean revolution. Exercizing this right we must strongly brace up ourselves so that we don't become passive followers or an instrument of opportunists."⁵²

⁴⁹ *Eritrea: Revolution or Capitulation?* AESNA and AEWNA (1978), p. 2

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.9

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 10. Excerpt from EFLNA, *Tasks of EFLNA*, September 1974, quoted in original.

To that end, the booklet claimed that EFLNA had been trying to engage the EPLF leadership in a serious debate about revisionism for over two years (and appended copies of letters sent to EPLF by AESNA and AEWNA to prove it). Distressed by what it saw as a revisionist tendency in EPLF politics appearing in the pages of *Vanguard* and *Spark*, EFLNA had also tried to engage the front's leadership by publishing its own ostensibly more orthodox line in the political journal *Consciousness*. Later, the booklet charged, EFLNA discovered that EPLF had banned the circulation of its writings both in the field and through its offices abroad.⁵³ EPLF had muzzled and isolated EFLNA from rank-and-file fighters, civilians, and other mass organizations. It had pre-empted the organization's autonomy and deliberately obstructed its efforts to create transparent consensus about political matters of utmost importance.

While Mengisteab surely did not think or act alone, it appears that many EFLNA members did not realize the extent of the problem until EFLNA's ninth Congress in 1978 (also called AESNA and AEWNA's second Congress). Speaking before the entire membership, Mengisteab related in detail the exchanges of the past two years and the EPLF leadership's betrayal of the revolution to Soviet revisionism. The membership, already confused and demoralized by the strategic withdrawal, responded with frenzied enthusiasm, denouncing and condemning EPLF and resolving to rescue the revolution as the new vanguard.

At the time of the Congress, Hagos Kisha, then treasurer of EFLNA, was in the field and did not know what had transpired. But even within the Congress not everyone agreed that EFLNA should split from EPLF. One vocal opponent was Gebremikael Lilo, then secretary of EFLNA under Mengisteab's chairmanship. Thus, a split also occurred within the executive committee itself over the issue. Overshadowing whatever internal and personal disagreements may have existed among EFLNA leaders and between them

⁵³ Ibid., p.27-28

and the EPLF, however, loomed the dramatic split between EFLNA as an organization and the EPLF leadership as the revolutionary vanguard. By the close of the Congress, EFLNA vowed to reclaim not only its former autonomy but the Eritrean revolution itself.

Almost immediately the fallout began. Within days of the ninth Congress members began questioning what had happened there. As one former activist recalls, “People went home after the meeting and started to ask themselves, ‘What did we do?! I mean, how did we come to that conclusion? Yesterday everything was possible with EPLF and today we are condemning EPLF!’ People started asking questions, friends started talking, it was crazy!” Wondering if they had made a mistake, they began to discuss regrouping behind EPLF. For his part, Lilo could not maintain his position as secretary given his opposition to the split and departed the organization entirely:

If you are asking me personally, I did not subscribe to this point of view. . . . I was not fanatical. I was the first one to reject that. Even in the executive committee I was by myself. I was completely isolated. 99.9% was in favor [of the split with EPLF]. There was nothing I could do at that time, but they tried to expose me as capitulationist too. We were subsisting on \$150 US dollars a month, and I didn’t have a penny. So I left [the Congress in Washington, DC] early and went to New York. I went to the residence, collected my stuff, some of my valuable photos of my friends and. . . . I moved back to Madison and joined my friends there. And my committee [at the University of Wisconsin-Madison] asked me to continue for my Ph.D. and I said no. As they say, once you put your hand on the plow you never look back! Then I moved to Chicago, and from there we started reorganizing ourselves.

By October 1978 the chasm had widened further. A large core of EFLNA members under Mengisteab’s leadership continued to defend the split from EPLF, but over half had abandoned it to start planning a new mass organization. EPLF issued powerful condemnations of EFLNA’s “traitorous leadership,” which reverberated around the world through the publications and statements released by other mass organizations. In its magazine *Resistance*, the Association of Eritrean Students (AES), the Eritrea-based umbrella to which EFLNA/AESNA had belonged, filled its pages with anti-EFLNA

propaganda.⁵⁴ At its second Congress, held in September 1979, which EFLNA did not attend “for technical reasons,” AES adopted two resolutions related to the US organization’s split with EPLF. The first commended those AESNA and AEWNA members who had returned to EPLF, and the second condemned the “‘EFLNA’ clique for its counterrevolutionary and traitorous line,” and called upon the EFLNA leadership to immediately turn over all resources collected in the name of EPLF.⁵⁵ The magazine also printed statements by mass organizations around the world denouncing the North American movement. Similarly, the EPLF magazine *Dimtsi Hafash*, in its report on the AES Congress, reiterated the condemnation of EFLNA and printed a speech given by Ramadan Mohamed Nur in which he made vague references to EFLNA’s treachery.⁵⁶ Throughout the United States, former EFLNA chapters also circulated memos to one another and non-Eritrean supporters, decrying the leadership and reasserting loyalty to EPLF.⁵⁷

The core of EFLNA members who maintained their position against EPLF tried equally hard to win support for their actions. In a counter-barrage of letters and “special writings,” EFLNA tried again and again to convince its own members and other mass organizations, especially Eritreans for Liberation in Europe, to follow their lead.⁵⁸ But their efforts overwhelmingly failed. EPLF was clearly winning the propaganda war.

⁵⁴ See for example, *Resistance* vol.1, no.2 (November/December 1978) and any other issue released in 1978 and 1979.

⁵⁵ *Resistance*, vol.1, no.5 (November/December 1979). See

⁵⁶ *Dimtsi Hafash*, vol.1, no.8, September 23, 1978, p.3 -4.

⁵⁷ See, for example, ፍሉይ ተወሳኺ ጽሑፍ ተበለጽቲ ባዕለ-ም ተቀሊዖም (1978) [Special Additional Writing: Opportunists Exposed Themselves]; አንታይነት ዓይ ሓፋሻዊ ጉባኤ ኤናሰአ ክድዓት መራሕቲ ኤናሰአ (1978) [Concerning EFLNA’s 9th General Congress: The Betrayal by EFLNA Leaders; Boston Chapter]; ቅሉዕ ደብዳቤ ብዛዕባ ዓይ ጉባኤ ናብ ኤናሰአ (1978); [Open Letter Concerning the Anti-Democratic Ultra-Leftist Renegade Leaders; Minnesota Chapter]; ቅሉዕ ደብዳቤ ጸረ ዲሞክራሲያዊ ሕሉፍ ጸጋማዊያን ፍሉልናት መራሕቲ (1978) ቅሉዕ ደብዳቤ ናብ ዓይ ሓፋሻዊ ጉባኤ (1978) [Open Letter Concerning 9th General Congress; Madison Chapter]. (Research and Documentation Center archives, Asmara).

⁵⁸ See, for example, ጥምረ-ትምኩሮ ናይ ወላኤታት ዓይ ሓፋሻዊ ጉባኤ ኤንሰአን ግብራዊ ወጽኢቲን (ሓምሌ 1979) (Collective Experiences of EFLNA’s 9th Congress and Plan of Action, July 1979); አዎንታዊን አሉታዊን ትመክሮታት ኤናሰአ (ታሕሳስ 1979) [Pros and Cons of EFLNA’s Experiences]. (Research and Documentation Center archives, Asmara).

After the split in 1978, EPLF sent Hagos Kisha back to the US to carry out damage control in his erstwhile organization. He and Lilo set about trying to salvage the remains of the pro-EPLF movement, but many people had scattered, embittered and demoralized. Rather than a well-coordinated effort carried out smoothly by the former two executive officers, as EPLF had hoped, new chapters arose haphazardly and with little connection to one another at first. Additional problems also cropped up when many members, even the most active, realized the extent to which the executive committee under Mengisteab Yisaq had monopolized contact with EPLF and contained another, internal layer of personal problems between individuals. They floundered for awhile, not knowing how to establish communication with the front, not sure even if the front wanted any more support from Eritreans in the US, since it had not yet made serious efforts to help alleviate the confusion:

EFLNA. . . . was highly concentrated and highly centralized amongst a few -- five or six people. They were in direct contact with the EPLF, and that's the only way [other members] would get in touch with EPLF. We sort of wanted it to be like that too, it's not as if we prevented it -- we never really ventured to write directly to so-and-so for organizational issues, we went through the centralized way of working. . . . And unfortunately the information was coming from one small group in New York City that was contacting the EPLF, and later we found out that they had their own differences with them. Also, there was no effort from the EPLF leadership to see the situation and circumvent that leadership to reach some people, they came too late. . . . They were only Mengisteab, and maybe another person, who were really in contact with EPLF. In a really serious way.

Eventually EPLF did send two cadres, Andeberhan Woldegiorgis, a former EFLNA founding member, and Andemikael Kahsai, who staffed the EPLF office in Rome. The reorganizing movement in New York, then calling themselves Democratic Eritreans in North America (DENA), organized meetings at the New School for Social Research, only to have them disrupted by anti-EPLF EFLNA members. As the cadres traveled around the United States trying to carry out damage control, EFLNA released statements condemning those returning to EPLF as "glorifying capitulation" and trying to

dissuade people from attending the meetings with the cadres.⁵⁹ Vituperative infighting between those who supported the reorganization behind EPLF and those who remained in EFLNA continued for months, until the 10th Congress was held by the reorganizers in 1979. Under Lilo's leadership, DENA voted unanimously to revive an EPLF mass organization, initiated a bilingual magazine *Eritrea in Struggle* [ኢርትራ ኣብ ቃል], and helped take up the propaganda war against the remnants of EFLNA.⁶⁰ As Lilo stated in a speech delivered just after the 10th Congress, "This historic congress was a negation of the shameful 9th congress. It passed several important resolutions, one of which was that our organization [DENA] should become an EPLF mass organization - AESNA. The congress also came out with a full understanding that the group that still continues to parade under the name EFLNA, a name it is not worthy of, does not represent the sentiments and aspirations of Eritreans in North America or the revolution at home."⁶¹

No one bore the brunt of the split's consequences harder than Mengisteab Yisaq. As the movement fragmented and factionalized, people blamed him personally for creating the crisis with EPLF. Suffering a spiraling descent into depression, Mengisteab tried as best he could to hold onto whatever was left of the cause that had come to define his life. One member who knew him well explained the effect of the split on the man whom everyone held responsible for it:

Mengisteab was beginning to get upset, was not really having all the answers, and he had a mental breakdown, a very serious mental breakdown. He wrote a four-page letter. . . and distributed it, and then he escaped from New York, from the people who were dealing with him. Because he was having this mental breakdown, they were trying to help him out. But he sneaked out and went to Philadelphia, and unlike Mengisteab, he went with his family members. . . . Family to him would not be of consequence, but at that time, he went, and we found him in Philadelphia with family members, who before that, it didn't seem he cared about. . . . You see his disturbance in the letter -- he is very lucid when he writes,

⁵⁹ Memo from EFLNA-Seattle chapter, undated. (Research and Documentation Center archives, Asmara).

⁶⁰ See ፍሉይ ተወጢ ድህረ [Special Additional Writing], *Eritrea in Struggle* vol. 1, no.3, February 19, 1979.

⁶¹ Transcript of speech made by Gebremikael Mengistu, undated and unpublished, approximately 1979 (courtesy of Gebremikael Mengistu).

when he speaks in person, but at that time, it was mixed up, jumping ideas. So they did find him, and they brought him back to the place where they used to live [in New York].

Clearly concerned about Mengisteab's well-being, the EFLNA members who had remained loyal to his position against EPLF put him under 24-hour watch in their Harlem apartment. They would not let him leave the premises, nor would they allow any former EFLNA members who had joined the reorganized movement make contact with him. Then, one day as Mengisteab and his comrades sat in their apartment watching television, the formerly admired, charismatic leader suddenly leapt out an open window, falling three stories, where he was impaled on a wrought-iron fence below. The words of one comrade, recalling Mengisteab's commitment to the cause, the days and nights he spent studying in the EFLNA office -- "he's going to die here!" -- rang ominously true.

Like countless other *tegadelti*, Mengisteab perished for his belief that Eritrea should be free. But I cannot help but wonder: On June 20 every year, Martyrs' Day, when Eritreans all over the world light candles in honor of those who died for the cause, is Mengisteab Yisaq among those flickering flames?

VII. Concluding Remarks

The Eritrean mass movement in the United States never fully recovered from its critical injuries of 1978. The shreds of EFLNA gradually disintegrated following Mengisteab's death, and while AESNA and AEWNA continued their mass organizational activities, vitality and momentum waned. Many formerly dedicated activists turned away from the movement, still supporting Eritrean independence but no longer defining their lives through it. Students returned to their studies, men and women focused on careers and families. Some despaired that independence would ever come to pass. Still others became absorbed in humanitarian efforts and directed their energies towards the EPLF's Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), perceiving it to be somewhat less politicized an endeavor.

The 1980s signaled a new decade of growth and change for Eritreans in the United States. After the passing of the Refugee Resettlement Act of 1980, Ethiopians and Eritreans streamed into the United States in unprecedented numbers (see Koehn 1991; Woldemikael 1997). Where before a mass movement of dispersed students and workers existed, families now coalesced into communities across the country. The EPLF itself opened an office in Washington, DC and small satellite chapters of the front formed in major cities, comprised of many former EFLNA members. But while mass organizations in Eritrea and other parts of the world continued to flourish, the American wing of the movement remained but a shadow of its former self: subdued, muted, restrained.

Several patterns of the 1970s, however, formed the structural underpinnings for the ongoing relationship between Eritrea and exile. First and foremost, trans/nationalism -- nationalist projects accomplished by transnational means -- defined the form of the revolution and shaped the global scope of its embrace. EPLF itself developed contiguously with organizations like EFLNA and depended upon them for sustenance and legitimacy. The front's strength, and the power of the nationalism it propagated, were forged together out of its own locally defined practices and policies, and the unanticipated potentials of its scattered peoples.

Trans/nationalism is a dialectical process fraught with internal contradictions. It harbors two souls: nationalism's circumscribed attachment to place and its homogenizing, "unifying" project, and the inherently more internationalizing condition of exile. EPLF's gradual assertion of control over the trans/nationalist movement heralded the arrival of its hegemony over the revolution as a whole and foreshadowed the character of the independent state. Through an evolving drama in which its ideology, practice, and nationalist vision were both reproduced and challenged from within Eritrea as well as in exile, EPLF managed to secure its administrative and discursive authority. It also secured the homology between political identity and nationalism, defining Eritrean identity in terms of EPLF identity. Evidenced in the 1978 EFLNA-EPLF split, resisting EPLF's

dominance signified a betrayal of the nation as a whole. However, the greater autonomy afforded by exile, and the efforts of Eritreans in the US to act as genuine citizens of Eritrea -- including challenging the trans/national state -- remain contemporary features at least partially rooted in the 1970s.

Thus, the linkage between EFLNA and EPLF is the setting in which trans/nationalism's possibilities, as well as its contradictory and even repressive potential, first became apparent. It is where EPLF tested its strategies for exerting trans/national authority. It is the origin of practices and debates still unfolding today. It forms the foundation on which contemporary Eritrean community relations rest and that which feeds their enduring restlessness. It is the continuing conversation between a battle-scarred guerrilla fighter in Eritrea and a philosophy professor in the United States. And it is the words of a contemporary Eritrean-American activist, too young to know EFLNA as it once was, but old enough to recall Eritrea before independence:

I honestly don't believe the problem between the EPLF and EFLNA was about ideology. I think, like today, it was more about power and control. For better or worse, the EPLF wanted control over its own agenda without too much influence from its supporters in the US. To the EPLF leadership, its supporters were just an extension of its fighting machine. But the methods used to achieve control were crude, and it cost the nation dearly.



CHAPTER FOUR

*Ertra Ab Sedet*¹: Refugees and Community-Building in the United States

'Community' is nowadays another name for paradise lost -- but one to which we dearly hope to return, and so we feverishly seek the roads that may bring us there.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Community*

I. Broken Ranks: ELF and EFLNA in the United States

The decade of the 1970s witnessed both the high point and the decline of two very different players on the Eritrean revolutionary scene: one, EFLNA's pro-EPLF movement in the United States, and the other, the armed forces of the Eritrean Liberation Front fighting in Eritrea. While ELF had laid the foundations of the armed struggle inside Eritrea since the 1960s, EFLNA had helped forge the trans/nationalist social field with EPLF in the 1970s. Both organizations were therefore pioneers in certain key aspects of the nationalist liberation struggle. Moreover, each had experienced growth and vitality in the earlier part of the decade, followed by dramatic deterioration at its close.

The mutual decline of EFLNA and ELF from 1979-1981, coupled with the overwhelming crises of war and famine in the Horn, ultimately led the two disparate groups to one another. In the US, former EFLNA members cast about at the turn of the decade, reorganizing under EPLF or joining relief efforts. At the same moment in Eritrea, ELF was imploding beneath the weight of civil war with EPLF, the struggle with Ethiopia, and its own internal factionalization. From 1980-1981, nearly 20,000 ELF

¹ ኤርትራ ኣብ ሰደት: Eritrea in Exile.

affiliates amassed in camps at the western border or in Sudan, following ELF's final defeat and exile by EPLF.

In the mid-1980s, many of these people began making their way to the United States as UNHCR-recognized refugees. There they encountered their EFLNA compatriots, most of whom had spent the hardest years of the war mobilizing for EPLF from the US. By all accounts, the encounter between the two groups was traumatic. The influx of Eritreans with varied backgrounds and experiences complicated efforts to begin defining and organizing an Eritrean community in the broadest sense of the term. Whereas the earliest students and workers in the US had come largely from highland, urban areas and similar regional, religious, generational, and class backgrounds, the refugee resettlement process introduced a much more diverse population.² Extended families and former guerrilla fighters alike arrived in large numbers, many with little education and skills. Moreover, the majority of them had been associated with ELF, and looked upon the students and workers who had built EFLNA as part of the rival EPLF. And while many people tried to put politics aside and reach out to one another, the Eritrean diaspora was wracked by conflicts related to political identity, nationalism, and the administrative presence of the EPLF abroad.

This chapter examines efforts to build community in Chicago in the years leading up to Eritrean independence and those immediately following it. During that time, EPLF successfully gained control over the revolution in Eritrea and extended its trans/national state presence throughout exile communities around the world. Examining the internal relationships of these communities -- including the effort to define "community" itself -- reveals a great deal about the character of the Eritrean trans/nationalist social field and the consequences of patterns that originated in the 1970s. In particular, the situation of Eritreans in Chicago demonstrates the contradictory nature of trans/nationalism as both an

² Although still unrepresentative of Eritrea as a whole, as discussed in this chapter.



emancipatory and repressive force. Even more specifically, it suggests that trans/national processes and the power of deterritorialized states may prevent exile communities from achieving stability and resilience as immigrant populations, hence disempowering them in both the US and in post-independence Eritrea. The state's presence, moreover, and its ongoing identification with EPLF synthetic nationalism, aggravates conflicts over political identity in diaspora.

While the following pages draw upon data collected in Chicago to support these arguments, there is quite more to the Eritrean trans/national story than the success of the deterritorialized nation-state. The enabling aspects of trans/nationalism continue to draw Eritrean citizens in exile back into local society and present novel and unanticipated opportunities for intervention. Similar to the way EFLNA activists struggled with EPLF in the 1970s over their incorporation and attempted application of broader philosophies to which they were exposed in the west, Eritrean exiles today also draw upon key concepts like democracy and civil society as they work out their narratives of the past and negotiate their contemporary trans/national relationship with Eritrea. In Part III, we will turn our attention to these latter issues.

II. Coming to America, Again: Refugee Resettlement

While the Immigration Act of 1965 enabled the first Eritrean students and workers to come to the United States, the Refugee Act of 1980 resulted in the largest mass resettlement of Africans to North America since the end of the Atlantic Slave Trade (see Woldemikael 1997:90). Until a sharp drop-off in 1993-1994, Ethiopians and Eritreans constituted 93% of all African refugees admitted to the US between 1982 and 1991 (Ibid). Statistical data for refugees entering the US for the years 1988 to 1992 show that 21, 901 Ethiopians and Eritreans entered in that four year period alone (USCR 2001). Drawing upon the United States Committee for Refugees (USCR) reports and other supplementary



data, Woldemikael (1997:90-91) determines that a total of 33, 195 individuals resettled in the US between 1975 and 1994.

However, the existing data is problematic for several reasons. First, it does not disaggregate Eritreans from Ethiopians; until formal Eritrean independence in 1993 the term “Eritrean” remained a self-identifier and not an officially recognized national designation.³ Discerning the actual numbers of Eritreans from Ethiopians requires a methodological approach not yet attempted by the few researchers who have studied Eritrean and Ethiopian refugee resettlement in the US. Indeed, as Kibreab (2003) notes, it is almost impossible to determine the actual numbers of Eritrean refugees worldwide and their various destinations. Analytically if not quantitatively, however, Koehn (1991) separates Eritreans from Ethiopians to account for their distinct experiences within the wider Ethiopian context. Both he and Woldemikael (1997) also include data from the years prior to the Refugee Act of 1980, when small numbers of Eritreans and Ethiopians were admitted to the US as seventh-preference immigrants, to arrive at their overall estimates of the US Ethiopian-Eritrean population (see Woldemikael 1997:90, Koehn 1991:151).

Both authors discuss two waves of resettlement, the first during the period immediately following the passage of the Refugee Act, and the second from 1982 to 1991, with the highest concentration of arrivals occurring in 1982-1984 (see Koehn 1991:151). By 1993-1994, as a result of the Derg regime’s elimination and the attainment of Eritrean independence, the number of incoming refugees from Ethiopia and Eritrea soon was dwarfed by the rapid climb in resettlement among Somalis and Sudanese (see USCR 2001; Farah 2000; Holtzman 2000). Since 1993, the first-generation population of Eritreans and Ethiopians has continued to grow, however, through legal immigration

³ Koehn (1991:157) uses the term “Eritrean” to refer to an ethnic group within the broader category of Ethiopians. This is technically incorrect, as the designation is actually a territorial or national one. However, his treatment of Eritreans as a distinct group is helpful. Most importantly, it treats Eritrean self-definitions with seriousness and respect.



(such as the Diversity Visa and Family Reunification Program), as well as the asylum process.

As of 1993, when Eritreans all over the world registered to vote in the national referendum on independence, the Embassy of Eritrea in Washington, DC estimated between 15,000 and 20,000 Eritrean adults living in the United States. However, the actual number of Eritreans in the US was significantly higher, if one counts children then under 18, as well as people who did not participate in the referendum.⁴ A decade later, in 2003, the Embassy of Eritrea estimated 30,000 to 40,000 Eritreans residing in the US (Embassy of Eritrea, personal communication). Since this figure still does not include those under the age of 18, the actual number of individuals recognized as Eritrean may be as high as 100,000.⁵ Demographically, however, this number is minuscule. To provide some perspective, the Eritrean population nationwide roughly equals, and may in fact be smaller, than the number of East Asian Indians in the Chicago metropolitan area alone.

Despite their demographic insignificance on the American immigrant scene, however, Eritreans and Ethiopians remain important in other ways. As Woldemikael (1997) points out, they form both the first substantial community of new African immigrants to the United States, as well as the first refugees to arrive in large numbers following the Refugee Act of 1980 (see also Arthur 2001; Portes and Rumbaut 1996). However, relative to the composition of their home societies, those resettling from Eritrea and Ethiopia are drawn from a very narrow segment of the total population, and therefore are unrepresentative of the diversity in their countries of origin. Due mostly to the refugee resettlement screening process, which favored those “whom the US government defined

⁴ Given the fact that the vast majority of Eritreans supported independence despite conflicts of political identity, most Eritrean adults are thought to have participated in the referendum. However, it is reasonable to expect that some did not, either because they did not support independence or failed to register with the Embassy.

⁵ Eritrean citizenship law is somewhat complex for those whose claims are based on residence versus those defined as Eritrean by birth or blood. According to the 1992 proclamation, any person born to an Eritrean mother or father, either within the state of Eritrea or abroad, is an Eritrean citizen. See chapters 5 and 6 for further discussion of citizenship.



as able to integrate into the society faster and better” (Woldemikael 1997:96), the Eritrean and Ethiopian population admitted to the US was heavily weighted towards males from highland, Christian, educated, urban, and socio-economically advantaged backgrounds. Indeed, the rigorous screening process typically took one to five years from application to resettlement, and was fraught with numerous bureaucratic hurdles (Compton 1998; Cooper 1992; Kibreab 2003; Koehn 1991; Woldemikael 1997). Thus, by virtue of their ethno-regional, religious, and socio-economic characteristics as well as their success in the often harrowing resettlement process, Eritreans in the United States represent a privileged portion of their home society.

Compared to European countries participating in UNHCR’s refugee resettlement program, which includes Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Sweden, and Switzerland, as well as those that admit refugees on an ad-hoc basis such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, the United States was late to begin accepting African refugees. By the mid-1980s, when Eritreans and Ethiopians were coming to the US in large numbers, sizable communities had already amassed elsewhere in the world. Some people utilized family connections or extra-bureaucratic avenues to resettle in North Africa, the Middle East, and the former colonial metropole of Italy (see Andall 2002; Compton 1998; Kibreab 2003). While no formal data exists comparing the Eritrean populations in these countries and the policies governing their selection and resettlement, the Eritrean population in the US appears less representative of Eritrean society as a whole than in other exile locations. In particular, the highland Christian bias in the US selection process stands out dramatically against the pool of all potential or actual Eritrean refugees seeking third-country resettlement, more than half of whom were Muslim. A cursory and impressionistic survey of Eritrean diaspora communities throughout the world suggests that many more Muslims and people from less privileged backgrounds settled throughout Australia, North Africa, and the Middle East than in the United States or western Europe.



At the same time, however, compared to the Eritrean students and workers who arrived in the US during the late 1960s through the 1970s, the incoming refugees diversified dramatically the nascent diaspora community. For the first time, the sons and daughters of more privileged families, such as those who had formed EFLNA, encountered peers with radically different experiences. While many of the resettled refugees may have shared similar backgrounds with the earlier student-worker migrants, their lives had been shaped by the everyday realities of violence, war, displacement, and in many cases, life in ELF or EPLF. Many had sacrificed their educational or employment opportunities to join the armed struggle and had lived with great hardship. Moreover, they brought with them family members of different generations, some of whom were as yet illiterate and unskilled, many from regions outside the major urban hubs of Asmara or Addis Ababa. Despite the rigorous criteria imposed by US resettlement policy and the relative homogeneity of the resettled refugees compared to Eritrea's population as a whole, among themselves Eritreans perceived important differences in ethno-regionalism, religion (Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christian), socio-economic status, education, and perhaps most importantly, political identity. We now turn to the encounter between the student-worker generation of the 1970s and the refugees of the 1980s.

III: Encountering Political Identities: ELF and EPLF in Exile

The students and workers who participated in the trans/nationalist revolution through EFLNA and EPLF's mass organizations during the 1970s felt themselves to be deeply integrated into the life of *meda*, the struggle in the field. As chapter three explored, however, the construction of a trans/nationalist social field proved an uneven process, fraught with communication gaps and power plays at several different levels, both vertically within the movement as well as horizontally across space. Even as some EFLNA activists viewed themselves as *tegadelti* abroad -- communicating extensively with EPLF, contributing funds and materials, and sometimes repatriating to fight -- the

vast majority lacked crucial first-hand knowledge of the hazards of everyday life in a war zone and the concrete challenges of life as a guerrilla fighter. However, the perspectives they adopted reflected those of EPLF, including their analysis of ELF. Perhaps nothing revealed these disjunctures as clearly as the encounter between the student-worker activists in EFLNA and the incoming refugees.

Although EFLNA itself dissolved following the 1979 split with EPLF, its former members and other EPLF supporters, some of them newly resettled refugees themselves, began joining local chapters of the front in the US. The Association of Eritrean Students in North America (AESNA), which was recognized as a member of the Eritrea-based umbrella National Union of Eritrean Students (NUES), also continued many of the same activities EFLNA had done, such as hosting Eritrean cultural nights, fund-raisers, and visits by EPLF cadres. the Association of Eritrean Women in North America, for its part, became incorporated into the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), formed by EPLF in Eritrea in 1979. Supporting the nationalist war of independence under EPLF was the *raison d'être* of all of these. At the same time, however, Eritreans had created no other institutions within American society that addressed their concerns or needs as immigrant residents of the US. All of their energies and resources had been directed trans/nationally towards Eritrea.

EPLF activists and members of the 1970s student-worker generation thus found themselves unprepared for the encounter with the incoming refugees in several respects. At first, even locating the newcomers could be challenging, highlighting the way that trans/national links to EPLF had superseded internal diasporic ones. Araia Tsegai recalls:

We were at a loss, most of us who were there in America. Even organizationally, we were at a loss to find out where people were going. They were being resettled to small towns we didn't know, and it took awhile for them to figure out how to get a hold of other Eritreans. They just went to the social services department in their area and. . . became accustomed to those little procedural things you have to do, like getting a house, getting a welfare check, having their children in school, getting oriented and learning cultural issues. It usually took a year before they were able to get out of those small towns and find Eritreans

in the nearest big city, to sit down and discuss Eritrea, and to learn there was an organization of EPLF.

Among those EPLF activists who resided in cities with large incoming refugee populations, a concerted effort was made to reach out to the new arrivals. Stunned at first by the number of multi-generational families arriving together and unsure how to negotiate the differences between themselves and the refugees, the student-workers drew upon the skills they had honed throughout the previous decade working with EFLNA and EPLF. But many were unaware of both the intensity of their own EPLF subjectivity as well as the ELF orientation of so many of the refugees. Helen, a longtime activist in EFLNA and AEWNA, started a women's group for the refugees in Chicago, where she aimed at helping women learn basics like grocery shopping, hygiene, and child care in the US. She was shocked to learn that not only were most of the women associated with ELF, but that they interpreted her actions, including her egalitarian relationship with her husband, as pushing an EPLF agenda:

Believe me, all I knew was that people were coming as refugees, I didn't know they had a stand with ELF or EPLF. In some of our meetings. . . there used to be tension, like if some of the songs are EPLF and not ELF, there used to be tension, even screaming and hollering. And I think people sensed I was *Hamadi'e* [NUEW]. The next day after one event we got together to eat the leftovers for lunch, and the women were SO mad at me! I was blamed -- why was the speech I gave like that? Why didn't I let them hear the speech before I read it? Why was my husband helping me cook? I came back home crying. Later on it was explained to me, that in our group, in Chicago, there are people who are from ELF, and people from EPLF, and those women resented that I took a *Hamadi'e* stand. It was like saying I was EPLF.

Tesfai, another longtime activist in EFLNA, experienced a similar situation when he reached out to the newcomers in California. Like Helen, he was taken aback when he discovered that his actions were filtered through the prism of political identity:

I was in Los Angeles at the time, and I received most of them, personally, myself. At the beginning we saw them just as Eritrean refugees. Most of them didn't speak English, they didn't speak anything other than Tigrinya. We saw them as displaced Eritreans, we didn't see them as ex-*Jebha* fighters. So we gathered and gave them our best -- we collected money, we collected clothes, we rented them houses, we bought them mattresses, sheets, supplies. We gave them bus tickets. And while we were doing this, they always had something in their minds, which we didn't -- 'We are *Jebha* fighters and this EPLF guy is trying to lure me into being EPLF too.' That was what was going in their heads, I later

found out. But when we received them, we received them simply as Eritrean refugees who needed our help, and we did our best. Then, sometime after they got settled, got their houses, jobs, all that, then they started calling us *Sha'bia*, or *muweda'ata*, which means 'reactionary,' I think, in Arabic. And we started seeing them as *Jebha*.

The lack of any community institutions not directly affiliated with EPLF caused discomfort among newly arrived Eritreans who resisted the front's presence or "politics" from back home. Some Eritreans gravitated to the more developed institutions of the much larger Ethiopian community, where politics might be difficult, but somehow less painful. Asserting Eritrean national identity vis-à-vis Ethiopia in some ways seemed more familiar terrain than contending with internal Eritrean politics. But as the refugees began reaching ever higher numbers, and as the liberation war dragged on, people from every background began recognizing the need for separate Eritrean community institutions to serve two main purposes. First, such institutions should support the independence and relief efforts at home, as the goal of national independence formed the common ground uniting Eritreans regardless of political or other identities. Second, community institutions were needed to as a resource for Eritreans in the US as they contended with language, housing, jobs, education, and cultural adaptation.

But how should such community institutions arise, and how should they function? Who should lead them? For those people who had long been organized under EFLNA and EPLF, again their skills, experience, and ideological orientation suggested a particular course of action. Because EPLF remained the sole force fighting for Eritrean independence, they believed, all efforts should remain beneath its direction and control. But for those who had been affiliated with ELF, the idea of allowing EPLF and its members to define and control all aspects of community life offended them deeply. At the time, few EPLF supporters seemed to understand this, even if the passage of time provides perspective today. Tsegai, formerly active with EFLNA and a very strong supporter of EPLF at the time, remembers:

Later, in the 1980s, when more Eritreans started to come, most of them were ex-ELF combatants, ELF cadres, ELF members. We started to look inward, to the community. We

said we have to organize our community, and probably that was a serious mistake we made. It was necessary to look into the community, but the way we approached it was wrong. Because what we tried to do was recruit them to be members of EPLF. You know, these are people who just came from a hot war, who are very angry at both ELF and EPLF. We made a lot of fights in the community.

The push to create secular, “non-political” community associations that could simultaneously contribute to the overall goal of independence and yet also serve the needs and aspirations of an increasingly diverse and contentious exile population proved far more difficult than anyone anticipated. For those who had internalized EPLF’s nationalist and political identity through participation in mass organizations throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, it seemed fairly obvious that former ELF affiliates and all others should simply accept the terms of the trans/national movement. Defining the community association as “non-political” meant that anyone could belong, but clearly EPLF would determine the parameters of participation. For former ELF affiliates and those who rejected the EPLF/ELF divide, however, no institutions created or controlled by EPLF or its members could be “non-political.” The contrasting subject positions of a population already shaped by over twenty years of divergence in political and national identity turned the efforts at community-building into a battleground that reproduced the myriad tensions brought from home. Complicating the situation was the fact that so many EPLF supporters in the US had never lived through either the war with Ethiopia or that between ELF and EPLF, and simply could not understand the perspective of their newly arrived compatriots. Their own identities had been molded by EPLF’s trans/national project and their extended sojourn in a foreign land.

Perhaps none recall that tension surrounding the formation of community associations as distinctly as the former ELF fighters who found themselves outnumbering EPLF members and yet somehow excluded from existing institutions and the definition of proper national identity. Many perceived the situation as insult added to injury: EPLF had driven ELF into exile, had taken control of the nationalist revolution, and now would direct the kinds of organizations and activities communities in exile would have. In order

to participate in the nationalist movement for independence, EPLF supporters seemed to be saying to the refugees, you must relinquish your distinct experiences and political identity in order to embrace the victorious front. Gebre, an ELF fighter, describes the hostility and tension he felt within the Philadelphia community's early organizational efforts:

The EPLF had to justify the civil war, why it decided to fight against ELF. And one of the reasons they used to justify [the civil war] was the failing of the ELF. So [the EPLF supporters in the US] were entirely against any ELF member. For them, being ELF is worse than being Derg. So this is where we start clashing. If I tell them I was fighting the Derg, I was in the war, they wouldn't believe it! Because already in their minds the ELF was bad, a bunch of bandits, a bunch of crooks, people who go around and sabotage the villagers and the people. So it was really tough to deal with in the beginning. It took years for us to express ourselves.

In Gebre's opinion, part of the problem seemed to lie in the fact that so many EPLF supporters from Eritrea spent the critical years of the war in the US:

When we came, it was like 'Here are the *Jebha* members coming'. . . The civil war was fresh and EPLF did not do us any good, it was not right, but they felt like we were just running away. It was getting pretty confrontational. . . . You see, they do not understand the life of *meda*. They did not know what we were doing -- they thought we were not fighting, that we were living a luxury life out there in *meda*, and that's why we got kicked [out] by EPLF.

As we have seen, mass organizations in Eritrea and the US were important contexts for the production of EPLF's synthetic nationalism. The years preceding the arrival of the refugees had witnessed the conversion of virtually every Eritrean in the US to an EPLF political identity. Former EFLNA members therefore tried reproducing the pattern of the 1970s, in which new arrivals whose prior affiliation had been with ELF were recruited and converted to EPLF. But many former ELF members continued to seek spaces for independent identity and organization.

The idea of community associations suggested one such potential space. For ELF-affiliated refugees and those who did not readily support EPLF or "politics" in general, the opportunity to take control of building such institutions autonomously from



EPLF was attractive. However, the problems of political identity and EPLF's trans/national presence were so pervasive that community organizing efforts afforded scant refuge. Asgedom remembers:

[In the early 1980s] there was no community as such, no association, in Chicago. There were people of Eritrean descent here, that individuals could connect with, and mass organizations of EPLF. But we [ELF affiliates] wouldn't even attempt to join -- I mean, you have to remember, we still had the animosity, the disconnectedness. [In 1985], many Eritreans were trying to organize an Eritrean community. Still the issue of ELF and EPLF was a dividing line for forming a community. . . The only existing organization was the political one [EPLF]. And we were saying, we have to stand on our own, create our own Eritrean identity here, in the US.

Even EPLF supporters recognized the desire among former ELF affiliates to stake a place for themselves within the Eritrean trans/nationalist sphere of activity. Tsegai recalls how, in Chicago,

EPLF people had mass organizations. So [ELF people] had really become the ones spearheading the community organizations. But then they became targets. I remember in one church, we almost had a fist fight, throwing chairs, calling names. It was the first time I had seen something like this. I said to myself, why would it happen like this? So we ended it, and the effort disintegrated, and we didn't raise the issue of a community organization for several months after that. But there were a lot of people who wanted a community to form, because they had social problems, cultural problems, economic problems. . . . So, really people could not see this community organization outside of their political feelings, and the hostility they have towards those who represent different politics from them. Because the situation with ELF members was that they felt the community organization was an extension of EPLF, which they hated much. . . . And from our point of view, this [community association] had nothing to do with EPLF, because EPLF had its mass organizations. But they said, 'We know how EPLF operates, you are going to dominate this organization.'

Countless other respondents in both Eritrea and the US echoed this same point about "the politics" as a source of enduring tension and mistrust in the Eritrean diaspora. In several places, communities split into separate associations as a result of the political divisions. Araia Tsegai explains,

There was one group that started a community center in San Francisco, way back in the 1970s. And we said, could it be ideal to be associated with the mass organizations? And it was quite a division. We [EPLF members] wanted them to be associated with the mass organizations. But the people who set it up there felt like, no, this should just be Eritreans, with no politics. . . . The second [association] came in Washington, DC, later on, with people who were predominantly non-EPLF. They may not have been ELF, but they were

not affiliated with EPLF. . . . At times, there were two community centers in one place, one very much pro-EPLF, and the other non-EPLF. The very active ELF cadres who migrated to the America, I saw them participate in such community groups as leaders.

But the viewpoint of many EPLF supporters was that their non-EPLF compatriots were simply misguided, and would eventually come around to accepting the front's leadership in diaspora. Hagos Kisha, then the chairman of EPLF in the US and the first Eritrean ambassador to America following independence, recalls the same time period although from a perspective embedded within that of the EPLF leadership:

Politically, at that stage, it was difficult. The ELF members and fighters were bitter, you know, saying 'EPLF abused us, because of the civil war we are out of our country and we ended up here, and not only this, but EPLF did it by joining with TPLF.' *So it was really a time when we had to explain what happened* It was time to start these communities, and we thought the political issue can be handled separately. Being a member of EPLF or not is one thing, but to be organized as Eritreans, to work for the community for the good of it and to help the country in general If you are going to have a community, *you have to recognize that there is no ELF, no EPLF*, identify the issues and work for them. *But they [former ELF members] wanted to politicize it.* In some cases they wanted to use it [the community association] to condemn EPLF. So a conflict was coming. [Emphasis added].⁶

It is important to see how this perspective reveals a naturalization of the homology between EPLF political identity and Eritrean national identity, in other words, EPLF's hegemony. Kisha's view reflects this hegemony in its assumption that creating community institutions according to EPLF's programmatic guidelines was *not* politicized, while the critique of such an arrangement by former ELF members was clearly politically motivated. He implies that the task for EPLF in facilitating community-building in exile was to help "convert" former ELF members to these definitions and practices by asserting their essential Eritreanness rather than their political specificity.

To a significant degree, EPLF proved successful. Despite the explosive early encounter and ongoing tension between EPLF supporters in the US and the incoming

⁶ Kisha was also elected chair of the National Union of Eritrean Students in 1978, and was stationed in EPLF's Rome office. After the split between EFLNA and EPLF later that year, he returned to the US to help Lilo, then Secretary of EFLNA, clean up the mess. He remained in the US after Eritrean independence and only returned to Eritrea to serve in the government in the mid-1990s.

ELF-affiliated refugees, the latter remained as committed to Eritrean independence as their EPLF counterparts. And even while EPLF-ELF political identities continue to matter even in the present, it would be misleading to argue that they have endured unchanged. Over time, a great many ELF affiliates developed sympathies with EPLF as the champion of the independence movement even if they did not formally join mass organizations or the front's chapters. Some eventually renounced their former ELF affiliations entirely to join EPLF in the US, or PFDJ after independence. Still others became increasingly active in humanitarian relief work under the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) chapters in the diaspora, which helped coordinate international food and medical assistance from hundreds of NGOs and channel it through EPLF's main branch of ERA in Khartoum (see Killion 1998:205-207).

As Eritrea came ever closer to independence, more and more people rallied beneath a single nationalist banner. Within exile communities, however, many conflicts endured regarding the community associations, their leadership, definition, and roles. Actors on each side of the divide began recognizing the need to remove politics as much as possible from associational life in diaspora. As Fitsum, a resettled refugee who had participated in EPLF mass organizations as a youth in Eritrea, explained,

When we say '*Jebha*,' not all who were part of *Jebha* remained *Jebha*. . . . There were a number of them who even though they didn't join EPLF, they were sympathizers. Not all *Jebhas* are against EPLF.

At the same time, Fitsum also acknowledges that Chicago Eritreans have not yet been able to overcome differences in political identity in their associational life:

We blame them and they blame us. This is our weakness. We should sit down and talk about it and forget ELF and EPLF. Here, we have the same goal. This community is for nothing else than to help Eritreans. What does community mean? Community means finding your lost brother or sister, helping people, building together for the sake of culture and language. It is our mistake on both sides.

As we shall see later, however, not everyone in the Eritrean trans/nationalist social field shared Fitsum's ideal definition of community, nor the sense that the political divide

should be addressed openly. This included the EPLF leadership. Yet, increasingly aware of the tendency for diaspora communities to polarize between EPLF mass organizations and independent associations initiated by those not affiliated with EPLF, the leadership in the field chose a somewhat radical course of action: to dissolve its historic mass organizations altogether, and set guidelines for the structuring of “non-political” *mahber koms*.⁷ In its decision to assert trans/national authority over community associations in diaspora, however, the EPLF leadership did not succeed in laying political identity to rest. Rather, it conjured ghosts that have not yet ceased haunting the living.

IV. Ertra Kom: Defining and Constructing Community in Exile⁸

IV.i. The Dissolution of EPLF Mass Organizations and the Push for Community

Despite the suspicions of many ELF-affiliated refugees throughout the 1980s, EPLF did not actually control the nascent community associations Eritreans were trying to form in diaspora. While many ELF members had interpreted the efforts of the front’s supporters to establish the terms of those associations as EPLF’s own, the leadership in the field did not begin actively organizing such associations until just prior to the achievement of independence. As EPLF prepared throughout 1989 to invade Ethiopian-held Massawa, money poured in from exiles all over the world who recognized this as perhaps the final decisive moment in the liberation war, now three decades old. Their response seems to have alerted EPLF to two dynamics: the massive potential of the diaspora for helping support Eritrea economically; and the possibility that former ELF

⁷ In Tigrinya, *mahber kom* literally means “community association.” The word “kom” (ኮም) is an adaptation from the English “community” or “committee.” Tronvoll (1998a:120, 130) and Pateman (1990:161) also note that EPLF administrative militias instituted in the liberated and semi-liberated areas and responsible for implementing various reforms, including land tenure, were also known as “koms.”

⁸ *Ertra kom* literally means “Eritrean community.” While it can refer to both the general diaspora community or particular communities, it most often means a formal Eritrean community association. The semantic differences between organized associations and a general collective of people are often unclear to Eritreans, largely due to the way in which EPLF has constructed the notion of “community,” as this chapter will explore in detail.

members could effectively rally behind EPLF on behalf of the independence cause. As Gebre put it:

If it comes to the overall national interest, then Eritreans have always been behind EPLF, even with our reservations and political differences. So at the time, supporting the liberation of Massawa was very important. And the EPLF started understanding, started realizing, that the bigger the number of Eritreans in the diaspora, the bigger the pool of resources for EPLF. So EPLF started exploiting it.

Indeed, 1989-1990 marked a turning point in the Eritrean trans/nationalist movement. For EPLF, victory over the dramatically weakened Derg regime seemed inevitable. As part of the front's final push to liberate Eritrea, the leadership issued a directive "dissolving" the worldwide mass organizations that had coordinated the efforts of Eritreans worldwide. Instead of working within their discrete associations of women, workers, students, and youth, Eritreans across the globe were asked to collectively refocus all their energies and resources towards EPLF's major push for liberation, including returning to Eritrea if possible.

Although information about the directive is spotty, and even current government officials could say little about what actually happened, its objective appeared to be twofold. On the one hand, EPLF was encouraging its most active supporters to return to Eritrea and physically contribute to the momentum they expected would lead to liberation. On the other, EPLF's leadership was aware of the conflicts of political identity plaguing so many diaspora communities, and needed to find new ways to consolidate national unity. In effectively abandoning the historic institutions that helped foster a particular EPLF identity and had at least partially influenced the structural divide between EPLF mass organizations and ELF-dominated, non-partisan community associations, EPLF hoped to ride the wave of sympathy former ELF affiliates felt towards the front by placing them on an equal national footing with longtime EPLF supporters.

Respondents in the Eritrean government as well as those who live in exile reported that the dissolution of the mass organizations produced shockwaves throughout

the diaspora. In 1990, the Department of Mass Administration, known as *kifli hizbi*, sent two officials from the EPLF leadership to issue and explain the directive. Mahmoud Sherifo, then an administrator within *kifli hizbi*, addressed thousands of Eritreans at the annual Eritrean Festival held in Washington, DC. Araia Tsegai recalls,

Sherifo. . . was invited as a special envoy. That was his job as the person responsible for the mass organizations, overseas, these things. He had come the year before too. It was part and parcel of his job. So when the decision was made somewhere that the mass organizations would be dissolved, towards a more patriotic citizenry, then he was instrumental in his capacity.

The directive outraged loyal and longtime supporters of EPLF, who had dedicated years of their lives and most of their resources to supporting the front through its mass organizations. Whether Sherifo adequately delivered the message and articulated the front's decision remains a subject of some debate. Hagos Kisha explains:

There were these yearly festivals, or yearly Congresses, where somebody is coming from the field to address [everyone]. So [Sherifo] came then, and he said 'From now on there are no [mass organization] members, nothing like that, it's for everybody, this country.' What he was trying to say was, people should not look into narrow membership of EPLF and all that, but the way he said it was -- wrong. Very wrong. And it pissed off a lot of our members. . . . They were saying, 'How after all these years that we worked, could you just say it like that? If there are things that have to change, then discuss those things.' But the way [Sherifo] said it was not right, even though that's not what he was trying to put across in the message. The message was to say, now everybody is supporting EPLF, it's not like before, so we should broaden our view, we should include everybody, this should not be just a few members of EPLF saying 'We are members.' Now almost everybody is a member because they are supporting EPLF, you know, taking EPLF as the only organization. So this is the message he should have said, that's what he meant, but he said, 'You can't have small groups anymore, there is no need for that.' This is the way he said it. So we kept explaining that's not what he said, or what he means, but, it really made a mess.⁹

⁹ Several months before I interviewed Hagos Kisha in Asmara, Mahmoud Sherifo had been sacked during the earlier stages of a power struggle within PFDJ that came to a head in 2000-2001. He later was signatory to the G-15's Open Letter to the PFDJ and subsequently detained with his colleagues. At the time of this writing, he remained imprisoned in an undisclosed location. Kisha's perspective must be contextualized within the political climate of the moment, when many dissenting members of the government were being discredited for past and present actions and subject to various ad hominem attacks.

Regardless of Sherifo's handling of the situation, the response among Eritreans in the US, especially EPLF supporters, was overwhelmingly negative. As Kisha points out, and as numerous others I interviewed also noted, those who had been active in mass organizations suddenly felt as though their efforts were no longer valued. With one simple directive, EPLF had placed them alongside former ELF members who had, to varying degrees, opposed and even fought actively against the front. In their anticipation of an independent state, EPLF clearly wanted to help neutralize the bitter conflicts between their supporters and those who had belonged to ELF or other political organizations in Ethiopia. In the place of mass organizations, the front proposed the community organizations, or *mahber koms*, as preferred locations in which to build unity and coordinate trans/national participation. Sadly, their efforts created more problems than solutions: many formerly dedicated members of EPLF turned bitter towards the front's leadership, and those who remained distrustful felt that the front now encroached directly upon what little independent spaces they had tried to carve out abroad. When independence arrived in 1991, further questions arose about the way in which diaspora Eritreans, and EPLF supporters in particular, should continue participating in the new nation-state. Although he had already returned permanently to Eritrea by that time, Araia Tsegai remembers how he felt when EPLF issued the directive:

We weren't really mass organization members; in reality, we were really partners in the construction of the country. Many things could have been done not to let [the organizations] go. . . . But I think the main setback might have been the idea that such organizations are no more needed in independence. My viewpoint at that time was, why not transform them into real associations? They could be career associations, they could be -- those who are trying to support the school systems, or health systems, in Eritrea. There are many ways, because these people are committed. You know, but to simply cut it, and then to say, 'Well, everybody's an Eritrean national now,' or that kind of feeling -- people said, 'But what is our role? Where do we go?'

Araia seems to suggest that had EPLF desired it, its mass organizations could have been transformed from civilian wings of the front into civil society institutions for

the independent state. But the directive instead alienated many former supporters and even discouraged some from returning to Eritrea after independence. Araia's comments also reveal the extent to which Eritrean lives, collectively and individually, had been so dramatically shaped by the structure, ideology, and praxis of the front, that many felt cut adrift without its constant administrative presence.

Gebre, on a visit to Eritrea during the summer of 2001, explained to me over tea one afternoon in an Asmara cafe -- owned by a former Chicago resident of ELF background -- how the dissolution of the mass organizations had affected certain individuals in the Chicago community. He told me that rather than receiving recognition or perhaps rewards for all the sacrifices they had made, EPLF supporters were "put in the same category as people who had done nothing at all, or people who had belonged to ELF." Many who had not actively supported independence, or had been ELF fighters, returned to Eritrea to invest or start businesses, Gebre said, gesturing around the cafe in which we sat as case in point. But those who had supported EPLF all along had little to invest since they had sent everything to EPLF during the struggle. More than a few had not been to Eritrea since childhood. "They felt left behind in the independent state," he said. Hagos Kisha notes that the issue continued to plague EPLF's relationship with its former mass organization members. "For many years," he said, "it would come up in every meeting that we do. You know, you go to raise something, an issue, and they say, 'Why do you need us now? This is what you said [in 1989]' So it came off totally wrong."

Thus, the EPLF's efforts to redirect the energies of their former mass constituents into "non-partisan" community associations faced difficulties at the outset. Not only was the situation fraught with unresolved tensions between former ELF members and their pro-EPLF compatriots, but many of those supporters had been embittered by the front's approach as well. While the expansion of EPLF's trans/national control into this area of diaspora life sought to take advantage of the greater support it enjoyed among many

former ELF affiliates the closer it brought Eritrea towards independence, it did not resolve the existing political tensions within exile communities. Those who continued to resent the presence and power of EPLF in the diaspora kept pursuing more autonomous institutions and actively resisted EPLF's trans/national agenda. In the following pages, I address the ongoing debate about the meaning and constitution of "community" and how it continues to shape, and be shaped by, both the EPLF's trans/nationalist project and the conditions of everyday life in the Chicago diaspora community.

IV.ii. Community Associations and EPLF's Trans/National Agenda

With the dissolution of the mass organizations, the task of defining and organizing the *mahber koms*, or community associations, came to dominate EPLF's new agenda for the diaspora. Two patterns in particular emerge when we examine EPLF's justifications and guidelines for community associations in exile. First, the notion of the community association, or *mahber kom*, was constructed as an essential cultural feature across Eritrean society, and therefore a natural mechanism for the production and maintenance of a common national identity in diaspora. Secondly, virtually no overt discussion of the enduring tensions between ELF and EPLF political identities as key problems within actual or putative community associations took place. Rather, in accordance with EPLF's synthetic orientation, these differences and their associated grievances were effectively rendered unsayable within the parameters of official nationalist discourse.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s regular articles about the importance of community associations in exile started appearing in the front's Tigrinya-language magazines like the bi-annual *Hagerey*, or Motherland [ገገጌ]. Throughout the late 1970s and much of the 1980s, EPLF's numerous publications had regularly reported on the activities of its mass organizations around the world, including the amount of money and other material resources they had contributed to the struggle in the field. Around the time of the 1989 directive that dissolved the mass organizations, however, EPLF's Department

of Public Administration (*kifli hizbi*) began reporting on the conditions of Eritreans in exile more generally, and within that, promoting community associations as necessary for building unity and maintaining cultural identity in diaspora. These kinds of writings aimed at contextualizing the Eritrean experience within that of expanding refugee and immigrant populations in the 20th century to argue that such associations were key to social and cultural survival. EPLF also pointed out that they could be important sources of power and legitimacy for the emergent Eritrean state vis-à-vis the Western nations in which Eritreans had settled.

One June 1989 article in *Hagerey* entitled “Eritrean Exiles and Their Community Experience”¹⁰ claimed to draw upon the sociological literature on civic associations to make a case for why Eritreans should develop similar institutions like those of other immigrant and refugee groups in the West. Citing the efforts of Jews, Greeks, Italians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Koreans, Indians, and Arabs, the unnamed author of the article defined the goal of such institutions in the following terms:

Civic associations, by bringing people together under the lowest common denominator, provide a conducive environment for development. More than what divides them, what unifies the members of the community is usually greater. Communities create the right atmosphere for the development of a single unified goal based on common interests and pursuits. Additionally, by respecting individual interests and feelings, communities advance the common good. In short, by virtue of its utility in allowing for participation, a community unifies the interests, preferences, wishes and feelings of all its members and provides a very important service (*Hagerey*, June 1989, p. 12; trans. from Tigrinya).

The objectives of these associations, the article stated, are to support the political, technological, and economic development of the country of origin, as well as assist exiles with education and skills. They should also provide moral and social support for people struggling within racially and socio-economically stratified host societies. For Eritreans in diaspora, the author asserted, the realities of racial discrimination and economic

¹⁰ “ግንባር ኮምን ተመክሮ ኢርትራውይን ኣብ ስደትን” ሃገረይ. ሰኔ 1989, p.12-19.

disadvantage had been particularly acute. Moreover, the needs of Eritreans in exile could not be met by informal mutual help between friends and family. Rather, organizations were needed to help create systematic solutions to the typical problems Eritreans faced, and to channel the aspirations they harbored for Eritrea itself. But the creation of such associations was hampered by certain trends:

Little or no studies were done about how to set up these communities. Impatience and competition has lead to the creation of more than one community under the banner of "cooperatives" and "social clubs" in some cities of North America and Europe. While a limited number of Eritreans participated in both, others who tried to merge them proved unsuccessful. The wish of the Eritrean exiles was to create a unified community, but this was frustrated by competition and personal clashes. But in some cases, organizations with broad public support were created (Ibid., p. 17, trans. from Tigrinya).

The article does go on to name several ways in which Eritreans had achieved success in exile, among them advances in the education and socialization of children born abroad, the increasing frequency of sports events and holiday celebrations, and most importantly, the achievement of “consensus” and “greater unity,” as well as an increase in “anti-colonial activity,” or support for the nationalist revolution. At the same time, the article stated that “notwithstanding these positive developments, Eritrean communities fall short of what was expected and hoped for.” Outlining the kinds of ameliorating measures that should be taken, the author revealed an approach deeply embedded in EPLF ideology and praxis. Among the recommendations offered were that “Those [communities] with experienced fighters, education, skills must come together for a common interest of their people and work together,” and that “[those] who disrupt harmony and understanding in the community must be invited to correct their ways or must be criticized.” Both of these recommendations were consistent with the leadership-by-example organizing strategies and Maoist-inspired practices of criticism and self-criticism long utilized within EPLF.

Similarly, an article in the January 1990 edition of *Hagerey* entitled “Eritrean Community Development By What Means?”¹¹ emphasizes the importance of “community institutions” in traditional Eritrean society. While such institutions undoubtedly varied greatly across ethno-regional groups, the article treats Eritrean culture and society as relatively homogenous and offers only vague examples of specific kinds of traditional community institutions. Other than a vague cultural justification for the notion of “community,” the examples provide little that is translatable to the refugee experience in the West. Moreover, the only ethnic group specifically mentioned, the Nara, seems a carefully chosen example intended largely to illustrate the multi-ethnic inclusiveness of EPLF’s approach rather than the specific benefits of actually existing community institutions:

For instance, early leaders of the Nara ethnic group were practicing democratic methods to govern themselves. To defend themselves from their enemies and to preserve their social and cultural way of life, they built fortifications and their houses on higher ground. At night they would stand guard by taking turns and during the day they would descend to the plains below to cultivate their farms. Today there are numerous community structures (in the villages) that can be cited as examples. Residents of villages and hamlets live in close proximity to each other and solve mutual problems through collective efforts (*Hagerey*, January 1990, p. 30, trans. from Tigrinya).

According to this formulation, local community institutions have constituted a bedrock on which contemporary Eritrean society, despite massive political upheavals and great internal diversity, continues to thrive. A common Eritrean national identity is cast as emerging organically from the “democratic” and egalitarian practices found throughout Eritrean traditional communities, long upheld by EPLF as the seat of authentic Eritrean culture, providing a compelling reason for their continuation as primary organizing principles throughout Eritrea and its exile communities. Moving from the example of traditional rural communities, the author notes that:

¹¹ “ምዕባለ ኡርትራዊ ማሕበር ኮም ብኸመይ?” *ሃገረይ*, ጥር 1990 p. 29-37.

And, Eritrean identity, dignity and unity have been maintained and solidified at a national level. At this moment, when the number of the liberated towns and villages is growing, our people are unified under one vision and are assuming a role in governing themselves. And a new chapter is emerging in the cultural and political life of the people. The Eritrean communities that are sprouting in exile are expected to renew, revitalize and broaden the rich cultural legacy. Wherever they are, Eritreans must build 'Little Eritreas' (Ibid, p. 32).

However, like its 1989 counterpart, this article also outlines once again the kinds of problems Eritreans face as they struggle to create sustainable associations in exile. Glossing over the exact nature of the difficulties, the author notes that “disagreements and internal conflicts end up negatively affecting the unity of the members,” and perhaps more specifically, “some members or non-members, because of their misunderstanding regarding the community and thinking of it as if it is without benefits or utility, or that it only benefits one side at the expense of others, view the community as if it is backward, useless, or a place of rancor” (Ibid., p. 37). At the same time, the author asserts that these issues should indeed be resolvable over time, “since all the misunderstanding that is claimed to be present is very minor and secondary to the desired development of the community” (Ibid.). Nowhere does the author discuss the actual conflicts to which he or she refers, reflecting EPLF’s unwillingness to recognize the problem of political identity by naming it directly. As we will see in Part III, a similar dynamic occurs today when supporters of the PFDJ government address the kinds of criticisms and potential platforms offered by those opposing the regime.

Taken as examples of EPLF’s approach to defining and constructing community associations in exile, these two articles reveal an array of interrelated dynamics at work in the front’s evolving trans/nationalist project. First and foremost is the way in which EPLF vigorously appropriated the notion of community associations from those who had originally initiated them as a way to avoid being drawn into the front’s mass organizations. EPLF’s decision to dissolve its mass organizations and tout community associations as the preferred method of both diasporic and trans/national engagement thus accomplished two tasks: it subverted the efforts of non-EPLF members and those

opposing the front to create autonomous spaces in diaspora; and provided a new arena for propagating EPLF's nationalist orientation. Community associations became a vehicle for the neutralization of fractured political identities by subtly dismissing those differences and recasting the Eritrean nation as organically founded upon the same kinds of "community" EPLF sought to create in exile. Thus the front at once incorporated these associations into its trans/national sphere of influence at the same time that it appeared to remove distinctions based on political identity by abolishing its own mass organizations and discursively constructing the nation as though it ultimately transcended the narrower political identities of ELF and EPLF. Again, this approach was continuous with the way in which EPLF's synthetic nationalism had absorbed and homogenized the pre-nationalist cleavages of religion, ethno-regionalism, and even kinship.

Given the significance of political identities in exile and their impact on early attempts at community organization, EPLF's very oblique references to these "conflicts" highlights its more significant silences. To be sure, the kinds of things EPLF chose *not* to say reveals a great deal about the context in which the front was carefully constructing the idea of the community as essential to the nation and linked to its ongoing existence. Rather than naming the source of so many problems in exile communities directly, EPLF glossed conflicts of political identity only in terms of "minor misunderstandings," "competition," or "personality clashes." No explanations or analyses followed the references to "split communities," or situations in which two distinct communities had formed based upon political identity. Perhaps the best example is found in the 1990 Hagerey article, where readers are told that "non-members" harbor the mistaken opinion that community associations benefit "only one side at the expense of the other," with no indication of actual organizations or opposing sides.

Of course, EPLF's Tigrinya-language publications were intended for internal Eritrean consumption and virtually any reader at the time would have understood the references as codes for EPLF- ELF conflicts. At the same time, however, the nature of the

particular problem remains unnamed, non-specific, and therefore delegitimized. By making participation in the nation both necessary and available to former ELF members through the dissolution of EPLF mass organizations and appropriation of community associations, EPLF sought to absorb and synthesize their political identities. Similarly, through incorporating the community associations into the trans/nationalist project, EPLF aimed to reproduce in exile the pattern pursued among the population at home: using organizations and their clearly defined practices to inculcate a particular nationalist orientation and political ideology as well as to control and discipline behaviors.

But perhaps most interesting in EPLF's approach to the community associations in exile was the way in which Eritreans were encouraged to participate in the civil societies of their countries of settlement and to strive for internal unity through "democratic" methods and practices. The 1989 *Hageray* article opened with the assertion that "it is not possible for those living in exile to attain political power in a foreign political system" and went on to suggest that "instead, it is important to create community for the exiled population" as a way for immigrant and minority groups to gain the support and attention of the host country government both for themselves as well as their country of origin (*Hageray*, June 1989, p.12). Perhaps recognizing the power of certain ethnic lobbies in countries like the United States, such as Jewish support for the state of Israel, or the success of many first-wave immigrants in gaining political power (and thus the United States' attention for their homelands), EPLF encouraged Eritreans to utilize the resources and various constitutional freedoms of the US and European nations by organizing themselves into powerful enclaves.

The strategy echoed that of the early mass organizations like EFLNA, whose major task in addition to supporting the revolution at home was earning support for it among foreign constituents. EPLF emphasized the significant role community associations could play abroad and on behalf of Eritrea if they drew upon both their internal democratic tendencies (glossed as essential features of Eritrean traditional

society) as well as the democratic practices available to them in the West. We will return to the uses, meanings, and conflicts over democracy and civil society in the Eritrean trans/nationalist project in chapter 6. At the moment, it is important to note that these were important elements in EPLF's justification for building community associations in exile.

V: From Independence to the Ethio-Eritrean Border War

V.i. Eritrea is Free: Whither the Community?

Clearly, the events most powerfully shaping Eritrean exile communities and their institutions in places like Chicago have been those happening in Eritrea itself. The long struggle for independence had dominated the hearts, minds, and daily lives of Eritreans in exile for many years. It also established a foundation to guide their activities and goals, despite certain tensions relating to political identities and EPLF's increasing trans/national control. The attainment of independence in 1991 changed the situation yet again and opened a new chapter in the efforts to build communities in diaspora. With Eritrea's freedom secured, those living abroad could now turn their attention more fully towards their diaspora communities and the increasing need for sustained institutions, especially those that could benefit children. Many people hoped and expected that bitter political divisions would cease to matter now that the one common goal shared by EPLF and ELF had finally been achieved. For a brief period anyway, it seemed they were right. The grievances between the former fronts washed away in the euphoria surrounding independence.

But as the EPLF began transforming itself into a government, and as the front's headquarters in Washington, DC metamorphosed into an Embassy, the state's role in connecting diaspora communities back to itself also rose to the next level. A more concerted attempt to coordinate diaspora community associations as part of the Eritrean

nation-state began to take shape. As a major religious leader in Eritrea who had been ministering to Eritreans in America at the time of independence explained to me:

After independence, the Eritrean government tried to really enforce those Eritrean communities, in different towns and cities in the States. And what happened was, there was an Eritrean community already. And many of the people, especially those who belonged to ELF, wanted it to remain an Eritrean community, embracing all Eritreans. With the new pressure of *Hegdef* [PFDJ] trying to organize the communities, it brought more division. It was a problem in all the communities, all over the country. I got more involved in 1997, because we wanted to see the benefit for all Eritreans, not just those who belonged to *Hegdef*.

One of the main ways the Eritrean government tried to involve itself directly in diaspora community organization efforts was through sending envoys from the Embassy around the US to hold meetings and educational sessions on how to organize and mobilize such associations. Within the local communities themselves, the individual PFDJ chapters were encouraged to play leadership roles and help facilitate individuals' relationships with the Eritrean state by mediating official Embassy business, planning events for national holidays, and distributing videos, tapes, and CDs that proved immensely popular as well as profitable. In Chicago, the PFDJ's newly invigorated attempts to assert control over community organizations upset many longtime leaders who had not been affiliated with EPLF. After noting that the first year or two of independence witnessed a dramatic mellowing of tensions related to political identities, Asgedom explained to me how the PFDJ's plan to organize communities re-opened all of those wounds. It also personally affronted him as a community leader:

The good relations didn't last long, til 1992, or 1993, when someone came from Washington, DC and said he wanted to form an Eritrean community. Many Eritreans here told him, 'We will form our own, you cannot form it for us.' The Embassy was doing that at the time -- for whatever purpose, they were trying to create some sort of community organizations that would support their own base. But here, everyone was very, very keen on now thinking that if we are going to be independent, our association has to be formally independent. . . . The PFDJ is a political institution. Sometimes they sent instructions through the Embassy to the community organizations, and there were times I said to them, 'The Embassy doesn't instruct me. You can take your letter back. We are an independent community organization.'

Thus, even after Eritrea became the newest nation-state in Africa, the “freedom” of its diaspora communities became even less certain than before. Many of the internal issues that had developed throughout the 1980s endured unresolved well into the 1990s. These continued until the border war with Ethiopia broke out in 1998, at which time Eritreans turned all of their attention again towards Eritrea, temporarily suspending the more specific concerns of the diaspora to protect what they believed was the sovereignty of the state itself.

But however powerful Eritrea and its state apparatus have been in shaping Eritrean diaspora communities, other factors specific to American society have also played a role. On the one hand, characteristics common to American society as a whole affect Eritreans as a collective, national population. On the other, the local spaces Eritrean communities occupy also contribute to the particularities of their internal relations, and orientation towards Eritrea. Since this study is not a comparative one, it is not possible to address here the variations across Eritrean communities in different US cities. Nor can we ascertain why vibrant, healthy institutions prevail in some locations, while others remain forever dogged by internal fragmentation and malaise.

Yet, because of the discernible, patterned strategies that EPLF pursued in shaping a trans/national social field to serve the liberation struggle and independent state, it is possible to examine the impacts and consequences of these on specific diaspora communities as part of a more general phenomenon. Moreover, because “diaspora” itself is characterized by connections between communities abroad as much as by engagement with the real or imagined homeland (Hall 1990), most Eritreans living abroad have significant knowledge or experience of other Eritrean communities within their own country of residence as well as in other countries.

Throughout the course of fieldwork in both the US and Eritrea, I encountered numerous individuals who had spent extended periods of time in different parts of the world, drawn together by bonds of kin, friendship, and political affiliation. They were

able to -- and often did -- comment on trends they observed across Eritrean communities. Several times, a brief conversation with a stranger on an Asmara streetcorner or in a cafe evolved into an extended discussion, in which the dynamics of my interlocutor's particular community abroad, as well as his or her reflections on Eritrea itself, revealed much to me about the global contours of the Eritrean trans/nationalist field and its internal variations. And while these variations may be very important in their own right, I also detected two consistent patterns: the tense encounter between EPLF and ELF political identities, and the way in which Eritreans were acutely aware of the state's presence within diasporic spaces. Repeatedly throughout the course of my study, Eritreans -- both those living in exile and those who stayed home -- revealed an understanding of the worldwide diaspora, and the Eritrean state's trans/national project, as part of a complex, differentiated, and not unproblematic whole that comprises what we know, and map, as the Eritrean nation-state. In the remainder of this chapter, I more closely assess the Chicago community as one node within that elaborate web.

V.ii. At Home Abroad: Situating an Ethnography of Eritrean Chicago

During the course of ten months' fieldwork in the Chicago Eritrean community, I came to know a young Catholic priest named Father Tesfamariam Teklemariam. Tesfa, as he preferred to be called, had been sent by the Vincentian Order of the Eritrean Catholic Church to study for a Master's degree in sociology at DePaul University. Encouraged by the Eritrean Catholic Church's increasing interest in the diaspora, Tesfa immersed himself within the local Eritrean community to study his compatriots' adaptive responses and social problems vis-à-vis urban American society. During his two years as a full-time graduate student, Tesfa also ministered to the Eritrean Catholic congregation, saying Tigrinya mass every other Sunday alongside Father Mussie, sent to head the Comboni Order at the University of Chicago's Theological Seminary in Hyde Park, and Father

Tekle, who studied web design and communication before returning with his degree and skills to Eritrea.

For his Master's thesis, Tesfa conducted a study of the Chicago Eritrean community entitled "Eritrean Immigrants: Correlates of Satisfaction and Cultural and Social Adaptation" (2002). As fellow social scientists studying the same community, Tesfa and I met frequently to discuss our findings, compare notes, bounce ideas off one another, and puzzle over certain aspects of Eritrean history, culture and social life. Small of stature, shy and softspoken, Tesfa humbly presented himself as a provincial son of the Eritrean highland countryside. But his mind was sharply critical of all he observed, and when combined with his deep knowledge of rural Tigrinya culture, he emerged a formidable organic intellectual with compelling insights into Eritrea and its diaspora.

The opening pages of Tesfa's thesis, where he draws upon his own experience as a new immigrant in urban America, echo themes emphasized by other Eritrean immigrants and refugees throughout my own research. Namely, the feelings of both strangerhood and new self-recognition that come with immersion in a radically different social and cultural context. He writes,

I was born in a small village in the highlands of Eritrea, where people have known each other face-to-face for generations. Relationships and interactions between people are simple, repetitive, and predictable. My ethnicity and language is Tigrinya . . . I have spent most of my life with my ethnic group. Therefore, I was oblivious to the fact that I belong to the major ethnic group in Eritrea. I did not have a minority group experience until I came to live outside my country (Teklemariam 2002:1).

And while the goal of Tesfa's thesis is to understand how Eritreans have assimilated, adapted, or resisted incorporation into American society and what factors contribute to their feelings of "life-satisfaction," his long hours of participant observation and his role as a priest in the community enabled him to identify other important dynamics. In laying out his research problems and methodology later in his thesis, Tesfa notes that

For 17 years, the immigrants have attempted to build a workable Eritrean community but have not succeeded, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper. . . . Even though there is a

lack of a formally organized community center among Eritrean immigrants, [they] do take part in various informal gatherings and small groups. . . . National identity tends to be the primary organizing factor for Eritrean immigrants. Most people support Eritrea and gather to talk about the political situation in the country (Ibid, p. 18-20).

Using classical, contemporary, and social-psychological frameworks for understanding immigrant experiences in American society (Foner 1999; Gans 1999; Portes and Borocz 1989; Sam 2000; Winchick and Carmant 1988; Zhou 1997a, 1997b), Tesfa concludes that Eritreans have neither fully assimilated to American life nor successfully reproduced all of the socio-cultural practices and identities brought from home, especially in terms of gender roles and the enculturation of children (2002:65-67). Although he does not systematically detail internal community dynamics, he does take note of the Chicago Eritrean population's diversity and rich, if often disorganized, institutions:

There is community, but it embraces many other satellite communities with various regional, ethnic, political, and religious agendas. . . . One can conclude that the social characteristic of the Eritrean community in Chicago is complex and it includes various group, out-group, and in-group dynamics. There are associations that revolve around religion, sports, region, blood [kinship], politics, or a mix of politics and ethnic distinctions. What all Eritrean immigrants share in common is being Eritrean and some cultural values. However, how Eritrea is defined or seen may vary according to various perspectives and interests of the groups (Teklemariam 2002:67).

I begin this discussion of everyday life in the Chicago community and its relationship to the Eritrean trans/nationalist project with Father Tesfamariam's work because his findings both corroborate my own and point out the importance of analyzing the multiple tensions within the community. As I have tried to show to this point, these tensions represent competing subject positions that collide through their common engagement within synthetic nationalism. The production and dissemination of that nationalism, and its associated acceptable practices, takes place within a trans/nationalist social field largely controlled by the Eritrean state under the EPLF/PFDJ. But as we have also seen, nationalism is deeply complicated not just by categorical identities like ethnicity, religion, or region, but also by the shadowy presence of another form of

oppositional, pluralist nationalism linked to former ELF political identity. Concomitantly, the trans/nationalist project that oversees and coordinates nationalist identity and action itself becomes a battleground where major engagements occur across an array of social milieus, including micro-level relations in communities like Chicago.

The Chicago Eritrean community remains a poignant study in dialectical oppositions: centripetal unity and centrifugal fragmentation, solidarity and animosity, mutual support and spiteful antagonism, commitment and apathy, startling successes and discouraging failures. During the scant year I spent involved in the daily life of Eritrean Chicago, I found that I could barely keep up with all the activity, and yet there was little happening that Eritreans themselves perceived as particularly worthwhile. Leaders and regular folks alike -- and men especially -- consistently described the Eritrean community in Chicago as "nonexistent," or "a complete failure." They attributed its persistent problems to poor leadership, a lack of a culture of voluntarism, scarce time and resources, and political and personal conflicts between individuals and cliquish groups based on ethno-regionalism, political identity, kinship, religion, or some combination of these.¹²

On one level, their assessments were neither inaccurate nor unduly pessimistic: organized meetings of the community association, ostensibly a coordinating umbrella for all other groups, often drew no more than ten percent of the total adult population (about 40 people), most of them first-generation men, and were marked by obvious tension, hostility, apathy, and disorganization. Such meetings often lasted for hours with little

¹²Women, however, tended to focus on the community's accomplishments rather than its shortcomings. They also seemed more reticent to discuss conflicts over political identity than men, who readily invoked the ELF-EPLF divide when speaking about community issues. This was not surprising, as most women's perspectives were shaped by their primary roles as caregivers for American-born children and thus emphasized getting over the past in order to direct attention towards the new generation. Most importantly, the kinds of activities women organized and the tasks they performed, such as teaching children or cooking for events, did not readily fit into the definitions of community most valued in nationalist discourse, as we shall presently see. Thus, despite the successes women achieved and perceived in the community, most men failed to recognize these as important and continued to describe the community in negative terms.

tangible accomplished by the time people left. On another level, however, my experience in the Eritrean community refuted this firmly-held and oft-repeated notion that the community was either a failure or non-existent. A great deal was happening among Chicago Eritreans, just not quite in the ways people anticipated or had learned to believe mattered.

In my capacity as an ethnographer, becoming an accepted participant-observer in the Chicago Eritrean community was a full-time job. It was also deeply inspiring and enjoyable. In addition to carrying out open-ended interviews with 45 men and women over the course of ten months, some of them lasting as long as six hours, I attended worship with the Orthodox, Catholic, and Pentecostal congregations; regular meetings of the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) chapter; political education and business meetings of the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) chapter; board meetings and general congresses of the Association of Eritrean Community in Chicago (AECC); and all manner of religious, national, sporting, and other holiday events. My calendar overflowed; it was impossible to participate in every activity, all of the time.

Aside from such regularly occurring meetings and church services, special events included traditional *gwylas* -- large parties with live music, drinking, dancing, and speeches -- to commemorate important days like *m'alti natsinet*, Eritrean Independence Day, and *m'alti deki anisteyo*, International Women's Day. Other special events included picnics at the beach, usually organized by NUEW; irregular meetings of ad-hoc groups like the Eritrean Defense Committee, a fundraising task force created during the Ethio-Eritrean border war of 1998-2000; candlelight services in memory of those who died in Eritrea's liberation struggle on *m'alti sematat*, Martyr's Day (June 20); ceremonies recognizing the academic achievements of youth, including graduation from primary and secondary school and college; and major Christian holidays like *b'al Ledet* (Christmas), *Fasika* (Easter), or *Timkat*, the day commemorating Jesus' baptism. In early

2002, after I returned from Eritrea, I also attended meetings of the newly formed chapter of the Eritrean Liberation Front-Revolutionary Council (ELF-RC).

Additionally, throughout my period of fieldwork in the Chicago community, I participated in countless informal gatherings like baptisms, birthdays, funeral wakes (*enda hazen*), and feasts in people's homes either for special family occasions or "just because." I befriended a diverse cross-section of individuals within the community with whom I spent additional time, among them young mothers, seasoned guerrilla fighters, successful business owners, taxicab drivers, and a small group of hip, well-educated, twenty- and thirty-somethings, many of them belonging to the second or 1.5 generation.¹³ At regular intervals I stopped by the Golden Pancake House Restaurant in Uptown to drink coffee and chat, usually about politics, with the largely male coterie that gathered there almost daily. On one occasion I was asked to give a speech in Tigrinya at a Women's Day *gwyla* in part to encourage Eritrean-American youngsters in their language abilities. After being introduced by a community association board member as "our best friend," I offered up my most concerted efforts in a short speech praising Eritrean women's accomplishments. I was met with resounding applause and a palpable intensification of trust and acceptance. Over long months of sustained interaction, most everyone came to know me as Tirhas, a Tigrinya approximation of my name, while I became familiar with hundreds of people and privy to the intimate details of dozens of lives. I experienced the unmistakable warmth and familiarity of a close-knit group of people who share durable bonds of kinship, language, culture, and national commitment. I also witnessed a genuine desire -- and intense ambivalence -- for formal associational life.

There can be no denying that the Chicago Eritrean community has seen its share of troubles, both internally and as an "ethnic" population in the urban United States.

¹³ Second generation refers to those born in the US; 1.5 generation indicates those born abroad but who came to the US as young children.

Repeatedly in the course of my research, leaders expressed the need for intensive “soul-searching” about the community’s difficulties. Their threefold objectives -- still elusive after nearly eighteen years -- were to sustain a working community association that could effectively coordinate all the smaller groups beneath it to participate in the trans/national nation-state in ways everyone felt comfortable with, and to secure much-needed resources for local members (Hepner 2003a). Several ongoing efforts were made to formulate a kind of “workshop,” where the community could hash out, once and for all, their various tensions and the reasons their attempts to sustain a secular, non-partisan community association had floundered. Often, my presence was treated as part of this overall process, and I felt myself at times becoming a therapeutic figure for those who shared things with me that they confessed were extremely difficult to say in public Eritrean forums. I agreed to be a “panel expert” on community issues, along with Father Tesfa and invited leaders of other immigrant communities, should such a workshop every come to fruition (it did not). And as I thought repeatedly about the kinds of things I would say to the community were I asked to perform that task, I considered an array of issues that seemed to exert powerful shaping forces on this particular group of people. Some of these may be common to all Eritrean diaspora communities, while others remain unique to the Chicago community.

First and foremost, the weight of the trans/national project and the demands placed upon the community by the Eritrean state (or EPLF) since the 1970s, as well as individuals’ own deep and sincere commitments to their nation and families, have dramatically weakened the community’s ability to form stable diaspora institutions that serve the very specific needs of the Chicago population (Hepner 2003a, 2003b). We have seen throughout the earlier part of this chapter how attempts to form the community association were affected by struggles over nationalism, political identity, and the EPLF’s attempts to define and control associational life in exile. Additionally, as Part III will address in more detail, the massive financial burden of paying taxes to the Eritrean

government, sending remittances to family members, and participating in other special fundraising events, siphon off the scarce resources of a population whose major forms of employment cluster in the lower-wage service sector (cab drivers, hotel staff, child care, and parking attendants, for example; see Tesfamariam 2002), leaving little left over for projects in the US. Indeed, the very presence of the PFDJ in diaspora, in the form of local chapters and even the Embassy itself, is a controversial subject and one factor contributing to the paralysis of the community association and other groups that have tried to form and function independently.

Secondly, the process of defining both a community and its objectives has been extremely unclear in Chicago, and, I suspect, in many other locations as well. Much of this murkiness stems from the semantic confusion and perceived antagonism between organized and unorganized forms of community life. The definition of “community” that Eritreans seem to uphold as most legitimate is that of the *mahber*, the formal, organized association that is goal-oriented, ostensibly democratic, and squarely in line with the overall goals of the Eritrean nation-building process (however that might be defined). The notion of a more loosely-defined population with important shared characteristics, who provide mutual support, friendship, and a sense of belonging, is generally not considered “community” by Eritreans. This very crucial difference first became clear to me when I found myself constantly clarifying with my interlocutors that I meant “community” in the most general sense, *hibrete-seb*, while for them the word seemed consistently evocative of the formal association, the *mahber kom*. It became even more important as time and again people expressed feelings like the following, shared by a very active, dedicated woman who served on both the community association board and in the leadership of NUEW:

Even though we don't have a community, the Eritrean people get together when somebody dies, when there is a wedding, when there is a christening -- whenever something happens to someone, everyone comes and contributes, participates. So even though we don't have

an Eritrean community, we still get together, especially for our country. That is our priority.

This tension has been a major feature and repeated stumbling block for the Chicago community as it seeks to achieve balance between its simultaneous roles in Eritrea and exile.

But other, more seemingly mundane factors also affect Eritrean community life in Chicago. Size is perhaps the most important of those. With only about 400 adult men and women and about as many children, the community is tiny in comparison to places like Washington, DC, the San Francisco Bay Area (Oakland, San Francisco, and San Jose), Dallas, Atlanta, and even Seattle. Such small Eritrean communities like Chicago's are acutely aware of their own numerical and cultural invisibility. Restaurant owners are compelled to put "Ethiopian" on their awnings in addition to "Eritrean," so potential clientele will know what sort of cuisine to expect. Young people routinely find themselves lecturing peers on geopolitics when explaining where they come from and why Eritrea is not the same as Ethiopia.¹⁴ Residentially concentrated in the northeast neighborhoods of Uptown, Edgewater, and Rogers Park, Chicago Eritreans also live in close proximity to the more visible and economically developed Indo-Pak, Vietnamese, and West African immigrant enclaves, exaggerating their own minority status among larger minority groups. And perhaps most importantly, Chicago Eritreans continue to define themselves against the much larger Ethiopian community, which has achieved considerable success in forming a mutual aid association with institutional ties to important non-profit service agencies, immigrant alliances, and the City of Chicago itself. Many Eritreans drew upon the resources of the Ethiopian community when they first arrived in Chicago, and a more than a few maintain connections through marriage, family,

¹⁴ To wit, I have met a handful of individuals who carry tiny laminated maps in their wallets to show curious but uninformed Americans where in the world Eritrea is found. Others begin with Ethiopia, which most Americans have at least heard of, and then move on to explain Eritrea was once part of Ethiopia.

friendship, or religion.¹⁵ This remains a sticking point for would-be or erstwhile leaders of the community, who have perceived the pull of the Ethiopian community as both a threat to Eritrean identity and an unwelcome reminder of the Eritrean community's own weaknesses. And finally, Eritreans contend with the ascription of a racial identity that categorizes them according to their "proximal host" population (Mittelberg and Waters 1992; Waters 1996), African-Americans. While the first generation often resists such a racialized identity, many Eritrean young people tack easily between their inherited and ascribed characteristics, sometimes preferring a racial identity over a cultural one.¹⁶

The issue of size should not be underestimated for its role in shaping Eritrean community relations, nor should other factors specific to Chicago, such as persistent racial segregation, high cost of living, and long months of harsh climate. These factors have all limited Eritrean collective life and contributed to dissatisfaction with the US, as Fr. Tesfamariam also discovered (Teklemariam 2002:75).¹⁷ With such small numbers, it is very difficult to sustain an active and committed core of volunteers without leading to burn-out, and even harder to afford the rent or mortgage on space for a community center. Concomitantly, it is all but impossible for Chicago Eritreans to make direct institutional linkages like those enjoyed by the Ethiopian community and other large immigrant groups. I learned this only partially from Eritrean community members themselves, most of whom had little knowledge about how to make such connections in the first place, and less interest in building alliances with other immigrant groups. A large part of my

¹⁵ Prior to the 1998 border war with Ethiopia, many more Eritreans retained relationships with Ethiopian individuals and the community at large, especially those who had spent part of their lives in Ethiopia proper and who spoke Amharic fluently. The issue of the border war will continue to be addressed throughout the remainder of this study.

¹⁶ Some 1.5 and second generation Eritreans have consciously embraced an African-American identity, especially those who have ethnic or strong cultural roots in Ethiopia and find it especially painful to navigate their mixed Eritrean and Ethiopian identities.

¹⁷ Through an analysis of survey data gathered from 60 respondents, Tesfa found that 66% cited lack of family life, 56% cited urban violence (drugs, gangs, etc.), 42% cited racism, and 11% cited bad weather as the major factors influencing negative feelings towards life in Chicago.

discovery about the extent of the community's structural disadvantage came through my own attempts at advocacy.

During the early months of my fieldwork in Chicago, I spent many hours contacting local specialists within donor organizations, refugee and immigrant service providers, existing mutual aid associations, and so-called VOLAGS, or voluntary agencies that secure sponsorship for incoming refugees through local churches. My objective was to learn how the Eritrean community could begin securing small grants or seed money to help start up the kinds of social programs people said they wanted, such as language and culture classes for kids, or job and educational counseling for adults and high school graduates. I was also interested in finding out where they might be able to share space in an existing community center as they worked at raising money to buy their own, a goal spearheaded by the community association. I planned to convey whatever information I gathered to the community association board and offer myself as a grant writer or mediator should they decide they needed help. My hope was that if the struggling Eritrean community association could achieve some tangible successes in providing resources and building external linkages to local civil society, an enhanced sense of confidence might lead to more productive internal relationships.

In the end, my efforts turned up little. In one extended conversation with the State Refugee Coordinator for Illinois, I learned that the smallest community in the Chicagoland area to succeed in founding its own free-standing mutual aid association and community center was the Cambodian, numbering 6,000 people. Virtually everyone I spoke to recommended that the Eritrean community consider joining the Ethiopian Community Association (not an option, as I explained) or existing immigrant alliances, such as the Coalition of African, Asian, and Latino Immigrants (CAALI). Recognizing that such an alliance may be the best option for such a small population, especially to secure state or private funding, I presented the information I had gathered at the next community association board meeting. I was thanked graciously for my efforts, but I

suspected that the fierce do-it-yourself ethic among Eritreans, the intensity of their national pride, the pressure to form an association both within the community and vis-à-vis the Eritrean state, as well as examples of more successful Eritrean community associations in other cities, meant they were likely to continue tackling the existing path.

Indeed, the board meeting in which I presented the information proved to be the last of its kind; within a few months, the Association of Eritrean Community in Chicago ceased functioning altogether. At its annual Congress in June 2001, which unexpectedly became its last, the association imploded beneath the weight of the community's internal conflicts and intense ambivalence towards the institution itself. The main item on the meeting's agenda was to elect a new nine-person executive committee to replace the outgoing members. Tired and exasperated, most of the board members could not wait to leave their posts. "Today I will become a free man," the community association president told me as we chatted in the minutes before he called the group to order. But the meeting turned up few who were willing to take over. Only the usual 40 to 50 people showed up at all, many of whom had already dedicated their time and energy to leading the association in the past. A commotion arose as people cursed each other for unwanted nominations and argued that they were already serving posts in existing groups like PFDJ or the churches. The outgoing president, an intense and often volatile man named Kifle, rapidly took a different tack and began hand-selecting successors who he said showed the commitment necessary to lead the community.

A cacophony of voices protested Kifle's unilateral action. Amidst the confusion, malaise, and frustration, one man called out, "What about the *baito* [traditional people's assembly]? Where is the democracy in this?" Meanwhile, Henok, an outgoing board member, seemed to choke back tears as he lamented to no one in particular, "Where is the appreciation? I have worked so hard the last year -- we need a workshop to address all of this anger..." Asgedom jumped to his feet, drowning out the fracas to make a passionate speech on behalf of the workshop plan, as others called out their support or rolled their

eyes in exasperation. Kifle, his temper aflame, cursed in English and sputtered, “We don’t have *nothing*, man, OK? No workshop will ever help us! We are never going to solve this Eritrean problem!” As I glanced around the room, taking in the scene, my gaze fell on Tsegai Woldu, once a powerhouse activist in Chicago’s EFLNA chapter. He had nodded off to sleep.

VI. ii. ‘If we are to share this Chicago’: Community Institutions and the Search for Unity

Despite the dilemmas faced by the community association for over eighteen years, including its cycles of coalescence and disintegration, other organized associations within the Chicago Eritrean community function more smoothly. The three religious congregations -- Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant -- each hold weekly services (bi-monthly in the case of Catholics) and oftentimes Bible study, prayer meetings, or social events during the week. Similarly, the chapter of the National Union of Eritrean Women was meeting approximately every 6 to 8 weeks during the time I conducted field research, while the PFDJ political party held regular meetings and political education sessions. Sports teams also proved very popular, with men and boys playing soccer several times a week in the warm months, and girls and young women playing volleyball. In addition to these organized activities, informal gatherings and special events as described in the previous pages filled in the downtime.

However, the relationships between these groups, their individual mandates, and the interests of those who belong to them are not always compatible with one another or with hegemonic definitions of Eritrean national identity. For example, many people reported how, on several occasions, both the PFDJ and the former community association planned events on the same day or in close proximity, either due to a lack of communication or for deliberately antagonistic reasons. Other groups have developed a particularly strong identity that others view as threatening to the primacy of nationalism;

for example, Protestant Pentecostal Christians have eschewed participation in many activities and discourses that sustain political fragmentation and conflict. While they remain self-defined nationalists and may contribute large amounts of money to supporting the Eritrean nation-state, most Pentecostals are very critical of existing distinctions between EPLF and ELF, and even between Eritreans and Ethiopians (see Hepner 2003a, 2003b). Moreover, Pentecostals tend to organize their social lives primarily around their faith, spending the bulk of their time in church and Bible study with their co-religionists. Others in the community express concern that Pentecostal beliefs, practices and identities are insufficiently Eritrean and are critical of their disinterest in other aspects of community life, such as cultural dancing at *gwylas* (Hepner 2003b). Similarly, members of the PFDJ party usually hold meetings on Sunday mornings, creating problems for those who wish to attend church services at overlapping times. Even unorganized groups, such as the men who gather in the Golden Pancake House to discuss politics, often from an oppositional perspective, create discomfort among committed PFDJ members, who view their “tea-house talk” as undisciplined, irresponsible, and potentially threatening to national unity in the diaspora and in Eritrea as a whole.

Additionally, other would-be organized groups that have tried to fill a niche in the community have met with resistance from existing organizations who guard their turf warily and fret over further atomization. Efforts to form a viable youth association to represent first, 1.5, or second generation young people, either independently or within the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students, have been especially difficult. At one point, a few parents and children together developed a group called Eritrean Youth in Diaspora (EYAD), which folded shortly thereafter due to lack of support from parents who could not afford the additional expenditures in time or money. More recently during the Ethio-Eritrean border war, another concerted effort was made to form a chapter of the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) in Chicago. T-shirts were even

printed with the NUEYS logo and “Chicago chapter” lettered on the front. However, this effort floundered as well, as Daniel, one of the erstwhile organizers, explained to me:

We had a couple of meetings, just as individuals, there were like fourteen of us, in their mid-twenties, most of them. It was a positive thing, but some of the community [board] members didn't like it. They thought we were courting against them. And we had to explain, 'This is what the youth association is, you guys do whatever you do, we will still support you, but we have to have a youth association. It's nothing against you, it's working for the youth.' Young Eritreans who live in America, there is a whole lot of things happening. Especially the teenagers who are growing up here, who were born in Eritrea or here in America, they are being excluded from the community, because there is no big community where they can go and get information and help. So we tried to do a lot of things. We even rented an office on Clark Street, just north of Lawrence, we paid from our pockets a couple months' rent. . . . So it was very costly for us, as individuals, and you can't ask young Eritreans to contribute a whole lot of money. Everybody was busy sending money for the country, for relatives, for families. You are stretched to the maximum level. So there was no point -- I mean, unless you have the resources to do it, build a youth association, there is nothing.

To a large extent, the problematic relations between organized groups have emerged out of the structural tension between the trans/national project encouraged by the state and the need for autonomous organizations that can address the local diasporic realities in Chicago. At the same time, these structural tensions derive their meaning from the real or perceived conflict between official nationalism and competing identities as Eritreans continue to seek a definition of Eritreanness not dictated wholly by the revolutionary legacy and one-party state. The diaspora community and its various attendant groups, both organized and informal, constitute a kind of laboratory for testing out new ways of being Eritrean that do not always square with the definitions produced by the EPLF/PFDJ, and as a result frequently appear antagonistic towards the state itself and its trans/national agenda for diaspora organizations.

Interestingly, people of every background and persuasion, regardless of their former political affiliations or feelings about the current government, share a great deal of anxiety about a lack of coordination in community life and the emergence of “small islands” that express and reinforce existing and troublesome differences between

Eritreans. For example, Asgedom, one of the most outspoken critics of the state's trans/national presence abroad, nonetheless spoke very passionately about the need for coordination and unity. When I asked him why unity was important, he responded, "If we are to share this Chicago, we need to be united as Eritreans." He continued:

There is so much at stake for being fragmented and disunited. . . . and I worry a lot when those small organizations -- in the final analysis, if there is no framework of oneness, then unnecessary competition creates unnecessary friction all of the time. . . . There is also the fact that we are Eritreans, and have a long way to go as one people, we have so much at stake, and we have so much people around us that really want us to be divided and disintegrated. Our survival, the survival of those small organizations, also depends upon us having this sense of oneness.

Asgedom's statement illustrates how the structural features of the diaspora community are understood primarily in terms of nationalism and the search for definitions that accommodate a wider range of political persuasions and sub-national identities while still remaining singularly Eritrean. Thus, despite his former affiliation with ELF and his critical stance towards the one-party state's trans/nationalist presence, Asgedom remains deeply committed to Eritrean national unity both at home and abroad. And as we will see in Part III, working out positive, productive relationships between different interest groups and sub-national identities in diaspora communities is viewed by many people as a prerequisite to creating a more inclusive and democratic state and society in Eritrea itself.

While the concerns Chicago Eritreans share about the polarization of the community into small groups may have a great deal to do with anxieties about nationalism and unity more generally, it also stems from very real shortages of resources and dedicated volunteers. In a small community whose time and assets are already spread thinly between life in a costly American city and obligations to the Eritrean state and family members at home, little is left for further projects. Moreover, many people seem to feel as though the existing organizations must be functioning and integrated before new ones should form. Primary among those is the community association, which up until its

demise in 2001, continued to work towards becoming a coordinating -- if not unifying -- body for all of these other groups. However, because of the community association's history as a hotly contested site of either diasporic autonomy or trans/national state control, the relationship between the community association and the groups it supposedly coordinates -- especially the PFDJ chapter -- has been especially precarious. Kifle, the former community president, drew on the example of the a holiday party to indicate how a lack of coordination between community groups expresses deeper divisions related to nationalism and the state's trans/nationalist presence, as well as why the community association's autonomy from other organizations (and especially PFDJ) remains important to him:

I remember at one point, in May 1998, there were two holiday [events] for May 24, Independence Day. One was done by *Hegdef* [PFDJ], and one was done by the community [association]. Because they couldn't agree, they both did the party for the same day, in the same week. I went to both parties. . . but there was no reason for us to have two holiday [celebrations]. And they both lost money on that holiday, because those who supported the community board members -- or those who didn't support the government -- went to one. Those who were PFDJ, and those who supported the government, went to the other party. . . So after I got elected [president of the community association], I went to [the chairman of the PFDJ chapter] and I told him, 'Listen, we are one people. You are *Hegdef*, and I am from the community [association]. I consider *Hegdef* to be under this community. I consider any organization who comes into this city to be under the community. Because you can be both *Hegdef* and a community member. I don't have to be *Hegdef*, but I can be a community member too. So the community is overall representative of our people.'

Kifle's point illustrates why the community association felt that its major role should be that of a unifying and facilitating body that would help prevent competition and tension between the smaller organized groups in the community. Given the past hostilities over the political affiliation of community leaders or suspicions about ethno-regional or kin-based prejudices, a concerted effort was made to create a mixed leadership. To that end, the nine-person executive committee elected to serve in 2000-2001 attempted to combine people of various backgrounds and group memberships so that all viewpoints and interests could be represented, events and objectives would not overlap, scarce

resources would not be squandered, and greater unity could ultimately develop. Three representatives were elected from the PFDJ chapter, three from NUEW, and three others not affiliated with either of the above to create a new board structure that would facilitate communication without privileging any group or set of interests above another. In addition, the community association also forged ahead with another major plan: purchasing a building to function as a multi-purpose community center for all of the various Eritrean groups.

It was in the area of purchasing “the house” where the conflict between the community association and PFDJ chapter, and thus between the local realities of the diaspora (represented by the community association) and the state-sponsored trans/nationalist agenda (represented by the PFDJ chapter), appeared most starkly. At the time the community association announced its objective to collect money for purchasing a building, the border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia was raging full force in the Horn of Africa. In addition to enhanced remittances individuals and families sent to relatives and friends, a major fund-raising campaign in the diaspora was initiated at once by the Eritrean state as well as by Eritreans all over the world.¹⁸ Once again, prior political affiliation or opposition to the PFDJ as a single-party regime did not deter Eritreans from rallying behind the state. The Eritrean Development Foundation, the Washington, DC and Asmara based NGO that arose from the ashes of the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), coordinated its chapters all over the globe to carry out walkathons on Martyrs’ Day (June 20), whose proceeds would go to supporting Eritreans displaced by the war. Chicago emerged a model city, raising \$45,000 in one day. Similarly, at fund-raisers organized by the ad-hoc Eritrean Defense Committee, individuals and families harked back to the days

¹⁸ In fact, there were several stages of fund-raising that took place during the border war. In addition to special events, where large sums of money were raised in several hours, the Eritrean state launched its “dollar a day” campaign. Eritrean citizens throughout the world were asked to contribute “a dollar a day to keep the Woyane [Ethiopian government] away.” All payments were made through the Embassy of Eritrea in Washington, DC and were coordinated by local PFDJ chapters throughout the United States.

of EFLNA as they pledged huge sums of money. Within several weeks, the Chicago community raised over \$850,000 to support the Eritrean government in its fight against Ethiopia. Additionally, people purchased government bonds to prop up the wartime economy. Indeed, as the attainment of independence had done in 1991-1993, the border war temporarily drowned out all of the internal conflicts within the community.

The community association's focus on buying a "house" during a time when the emphasis and resources were all directed to Eritrea proved fatal. While many people initially supported the idea of buying a community building and contributed money generously, the plan eventually came under attack by those who felt that every available resource should be directed towards Eritrea as long as it was in crisis. By the time the community association had amassed \$35,000 in donations, barely enough to put a down payment on a property, they had hit a roadblock. The financial reserves of the community, already stressed with contributions for the war at home, had been tapped out. As the association continued to prod, people who formerly supported the plan to buy a building became very upset. The motives of the community association came under fire, and some people began suggesting that the association was trying to undermine the PFDJ, and ultimately, Eritrean sovereignty, by redirecting money and attention that should be spent on Eritrea. Tsehainesh, active in NUEW and a former ELF fighter, recounted why she thought the idea to buy a house was poorly timed and highly suspect:

You have to know your people first, what kinds of needs they have. At that time, there was war in my country! I would prefer to give \$500 to the people who were suffering and dying, who don't have even a tent to live in! They were everywhere in the mountains, just displaced. Why did they [the community association] raise the issue at that time? Because they were against EPLF! That's why I don't support it at the time. I don't want to pay \$500 to put it in a bank and buy a building for the community at a time when the country needs help! It's bad that they raised the issue at that time. *You can't support the community and your country at one time.* Once there is peace, nobody asks you for help, and it's okay to do it for your community. But at that time the situation in my country was very bad, and the government was asking for a lot of money. They were going from home to home, asking for \$500. I don't know, I would like to have a building or a place for the Eritrean community. But not at that time. . . . *When you ask for money for the community it means you are in competition with the government.* [Emphasis added].

Others, however, many of them staunch supporters of the Eritrean government, viewed the community center as a major contribution towards building Eritrean unity in diaspora, which would have an overall positive impact on Eritrea itself. Habtu, a very active member of PFDJ in Chicago and community board member who had been an activist in EFLNA in the early 1970s, then a fighter in the field with EPLF, and finally a resettled refugee, stated that:

The house is an environment for everybody, for unity, for our culture, for having meetings, for everything. That house means Eritrea! . . . We have to show the people that the community exists.

Past or present political affiliation or group membership appears to have little to do with whether or not people supported the community association's efforts to buy the building or whether they vocally opposed it. In fact, many people who articulated viewpoints critical of the PFDJ and its presence in the diaspora nonetheless saw enough of a distinction between the party and the state to warrant supporting the government in times of war. Others who fully supported PFDJ and actively contributed to the war effort saw the community center as yet another way to consolidate Eritrean unity at a particularly important time in the country's history. And still others, perhaps no more than a handful, did indeed appear to be using the community center as a way to divert resources away from the government for reasons related to political opposition.

The crucial pattern that emerged, however, had to do with the way in which many active PFDJ members and supporters continued to see the community association as part and parcel of the one-party state's mandate to build unity in the diaspora, and perhaps ultimately to control it, whereas others in the association's leadership viewed the purchase of a building as essential to the community's autonomy from the Eritrean state's trans/national agenda. Additionally, more than a few shared Tsehainesh's feeling that diasporic concerns and trans/national commitments to Eritrea are often mutually exclusive. The result was a bewildering conglomeration of motives, agendas, viewpoints,

and politicized goals that eventually contributed to the association's descent into paralysis. The struggle waged throughout the 1980s and '90s over the community association's role as an autonomous, diasporic institution versus its potential as a key element in the EPLF/PFDJ's reproduction of nationalist identity and state power appeared to have come full circle again. Witness two diametrically opposed visions of the community's association's role, both articulated in 2001: the first, aired by Habtu, captures the way in which the EPLF/PFDJ and its members abroad continue to view organizations as primary locations for the production of unified trans/national subjects:

Hegdef is a political organization, *Sha'bia*. So *Hegdef* supports the government. *Hegdef*'s teaching, *Hegdef*'s organization, is to support this government. What they do is organize the people. So we support *Hegdef*, and we support the community [association] very much. Whether they like it or not, when people organize in one association, it helps the government. That's why we fight for the community [association] to grow and be organized. . . . The community [association] has its own agenda, and they talk about that agenda, not *Hegdef*'s agenda. But if the community [association] is united it helps Eritrea, the people, and the government. That's our theory.

And the second perspective, posted on an Eritrean website known for its anti-EPLF/PFDJ bent, reveals how those critical of EPLF/PFDJ's presence in the diaspora resent the appropriation of community organizations they believe should provide services in host countries:

No one can deny the role the "community centers" played in the mobilization of resources during the liberation struggle. That has greatly contributed to the weakening of the occupational regimes that led to the independence of the Eritrean land. However, the intolerant culture that prevailed during the years of the struggle was perpetuated in those centers. They remained partisan bastions intimidating anyone who moved an inch outside the PFDJ-drawn line of discipline. . . . These organizations, many of them enjoying tax exempt status (e.g. 501 c-3 in the USA), do very little of what convention [sic] community centers do. You won't find them counseling the youth; you won't find them assisting with gang problems, alcoholism, drug addiction, divorce and separation, refugee resettlement, assimilation into host countries, job training, job services, etc. . . . Politically, their function is not to reconcile old wounds but to pour salt over them.¹⁹

¹⁹ "Blueprint for Action," November 5, 2001. www.awate.com.

VII. The Search for Community and Autonomy: Diaspora, Modernity, and Trans/National Dissonance

The tension between Eritrea and exile, between the Horn of Africa and the United States, between the diverse interests of exiles and the state's trans/national agenda, are not the only contradictions Eritreans live within and among. A decidedly acute tension also characterizes the relationship between organized and unorganized forms of social life, which leads many people to assert the failure, non-existence, or impossibility of attaining "real" community. An ethnographic investigation of Eritreans in Chicago, however, reveals that community, in some sense at least, does exist. One young woman, born in a Sudanese refugee camp to ELF-affiliated parents, expressed it in these terms:

The organization hasn't been able to get going. It seems like they're kind of organized without being organized. It's hard to describe it, like it's there, but once you try to put it into words or try to structure it, it becomes hard because you find out all of the divisions that are in it maybe. Yeah, so it's there, but you can't put it under one umbrella, in a sense. What unites them is that they're Eritreans and everybody cares about each other, but when you try to put politics or something in it, it gets hard. I mean if it's just a get together just to raise money for Eritrea, everyone will show up, but if it's going to be an organization, people get suspicious. You know, 'who's in it?' You know, sometimes that determines -- even if it's neutral, if they know that person's political view, they don't want to be part of it, so it becomes hard when you try to make it into an organization. But, it's there as far as Eritreans just caring about each other.

As we have seen to this point, the historical and socio-political realities of Eritrea and exile account for at least some aspects of the troubled relationship between diaspora Eritreans as an "ethnic" population sharing important bonds of kinship, national origin, language, culture, and historical experience, and their attempts to create stable institutions. In other ways, however, the tension between organized institutions and the informal, face-to-face qualities of the Chicago Eritrean community also relates to the efforts of the EPLF, and the Eritrean revolution as a whole, to carry the small and largely traditional Horn of African country into the modern world order.

Indeed, an important goal of revolutionary nationalist movements, especially those in the developing world, has been to bring about a new reckoning between patterns of traditional society and those that enable the formulation of a modern nation-state



capable of negotiating both legitimacy and a place in the global political-economy. As Malkki (1995b, 1997) has pointed out, the nation-state form remains the dominant geopolitical and socio-cultural configuration around the world today, leading both real and putative states to struggle tirelessly for their place in the “national order of things.” Even in the age of “globalization,” which includes features like increased international migration, refugee flows, transnational identities and processes, new technologies of travel and communication, and multinational capital and post-Fordist “flexible accumulation” (Harvey 1996; Jameson 1984), the nation-state has retained its significance as a central feature of human organization and social life, if not necessarily sovereign administration (see Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001).

For new, marginalized, and poor nation-states like Eritrea, the goals of “development” and the meaning of sovereignty under globalizing conditions are especially acute and preoccupying. Nationalism plays an important role in relationship to these goals and dilemmas, as one of the central promises nationalist leaders impart to their populations is a new era of social and economic development for the sovereign state (Chatterjee 1993). However, negotiating both economic development and internal socio-political stability in a country with historic tendencies towards fragmentation, sectarianism, and ecological disaster is no small task, and Eritrea is by no means alone in this struggle. Throughout the postcolonial African continent, the quest for the nation-state has been “flawed at the outset” (Laakso and Olukoshi 1996:11) due to the contradiction between the idea of the state as comprised of a unified national culture and the actually existing diversity of those who would be incorporated into the nation-state. In this regard, the efforts of Eritreans to forge “unity” are by no means unique.

At the same time, however, the historic dilemmas facing all African nation-states have been made all the more complex for Eritrea because they have taken place largely in the era of globalization, the conditions of which have included the out-migration of fully one-third of the country’s total population. From the outset, the Eritrean state (and EPLF

as a statelike body before independence) has sought to adapt itself to these conditions by utilizing trans/national processes to the advantage of the revolution and now the post-independence nation- and state-building project. But the reproduction of the form of nationalism underpinning this project has been at serious odds with the actual experiences and interests of Eritreans. In addition to the historic differences we explored in Part I, the realities of exile have introduced even greater complexity. As the state under the former EPLF struggles to administer its unwieldy trans/nation according to the same patterns created during the revolution, the exclusivist claims of an already contested nationalism collide with the realities and exploded identities of Eritreans in exile, for whom nationalism has ceased, or failed, to meet real needs and supply compelling meanings. The crisis in which the Eritrean community of Chicago now finds itself is thus evidence of nationalism's failure to cope with its own territorial and ideological projects according to the conditions wrought by globalization.

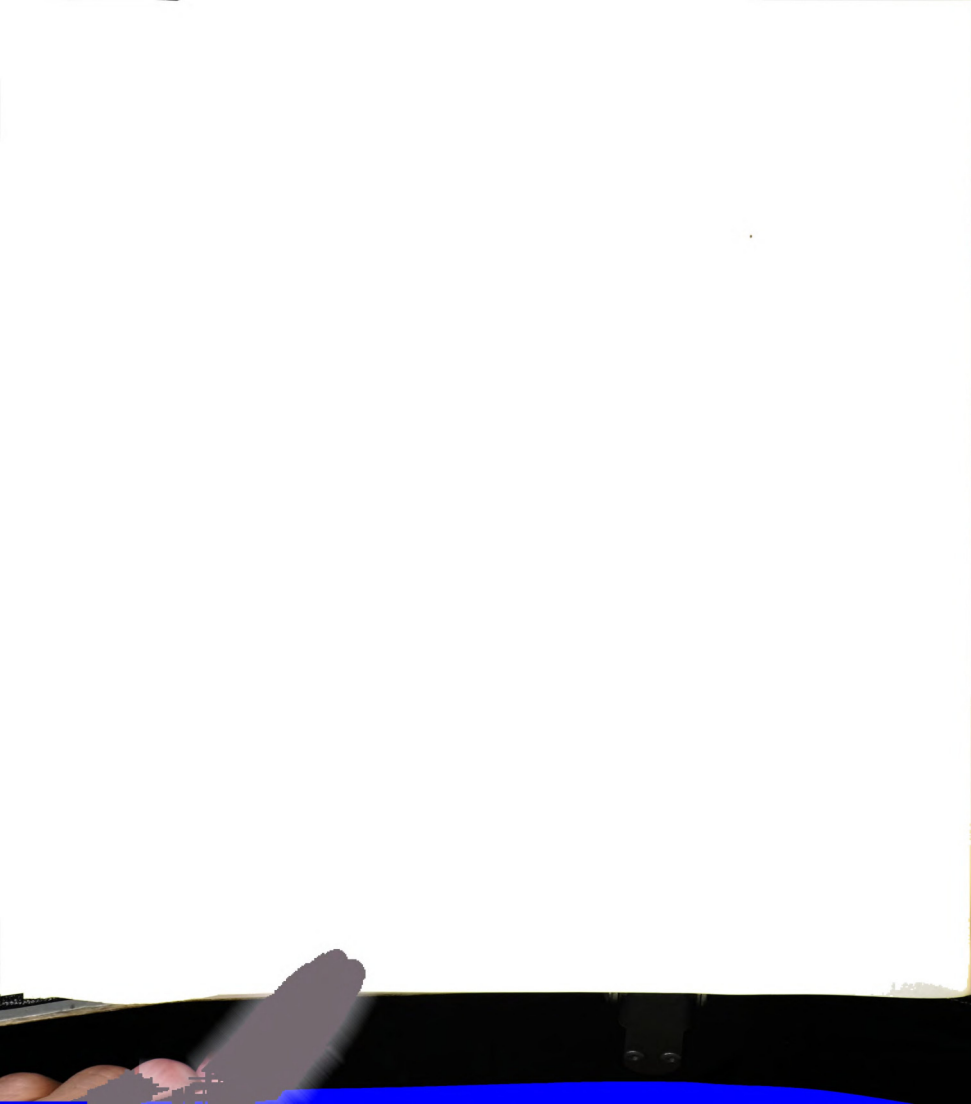
While the Eritrean revolution was shaped from inception by the movement of its supporters abroad and drew upon technologies and practices associated with the transnational moment to facilitate its nationalist goals -- creating what I have referred to as a trans/nationalist social field --- conditions specific to the revolution have complicated the post-independence situation. Namely, the differences among Eritreans in exile, especially those related to political identity, have rendered state nationalism a disunifying force when deployed trans/nationally. Although EPLF attempted to extend its homogenizing, synthetic orientation by replacing its mass organizations abroad with broader and "inclusive" community associations that would discourage sub-national or oppositional political loyalties, this approach has only kept alive grievances associated with the past and prevented stable diasporic communities from forming. As a result, the Eritrean community of Chicago remains disempowered as an immigrant community in the United States, demonstrating how trans/nationalism can be limiting, repressive, and disempowering. This is especially true when trans/national relations operate according to



the needs and demands of a nationalist state whose administrative capacities may be deterritorialized, but its ideology and interests remain narrowly oriented towards its local terrain, its needs, and the maintenance of its own power. From the vantage point of exile communities, the trans/national citizenry is being shaped to benefit the state, while the state does comparatively little to accommodate the genuine realities and needs of its citizenry abroad.

All of these processes taken together thus help account for the kind of conflicts occurring within exile communities like Chicago, where an ambivalent entanglement with the Eritrean state's trans/nationalist project and the hegemonic form of nationalism it represents leads people to struggle with one another and the one-party state in their definitions and practices of community. The EPLF's unrelenting focus on organizations and formal associations as the most legitimate form of social life reveals both the one-party state's modernist orientation and the intensity with which it pursues active interventions in the lifeworld of its people (Habermas 1981; see also Scott 1998). Within a trans/nationalist arrangement, moreover, this penetration into the everyday realities of Eritrean diaspora communities prevents them from fully reterritorializing (Louie 1999) in relation to American society. This incomplete reterritorialization, as we shall see in Part III, works in the interest of the Eritrean state by keeping Eritreans oriented towards the sending society. At the same time, it subverts the one-party state's control and objectives by encompassing within its orbit -- and thus making itself vulnerable to -- diasporic citizens with proliferating ideas, identities, and goals for Eritrea.

They also remind us how, for most Eritreans and for others, far from "an island of 'natural understanding,' a 'warm circle' where they can lay down their arms and stop fighting, the *really existing* community will feel like a besieged fortress being continually bombarded by (often invisible) enemies outside while time and again being torn apart by discord within: ramparts and turrets will be the places where the seekers of communal



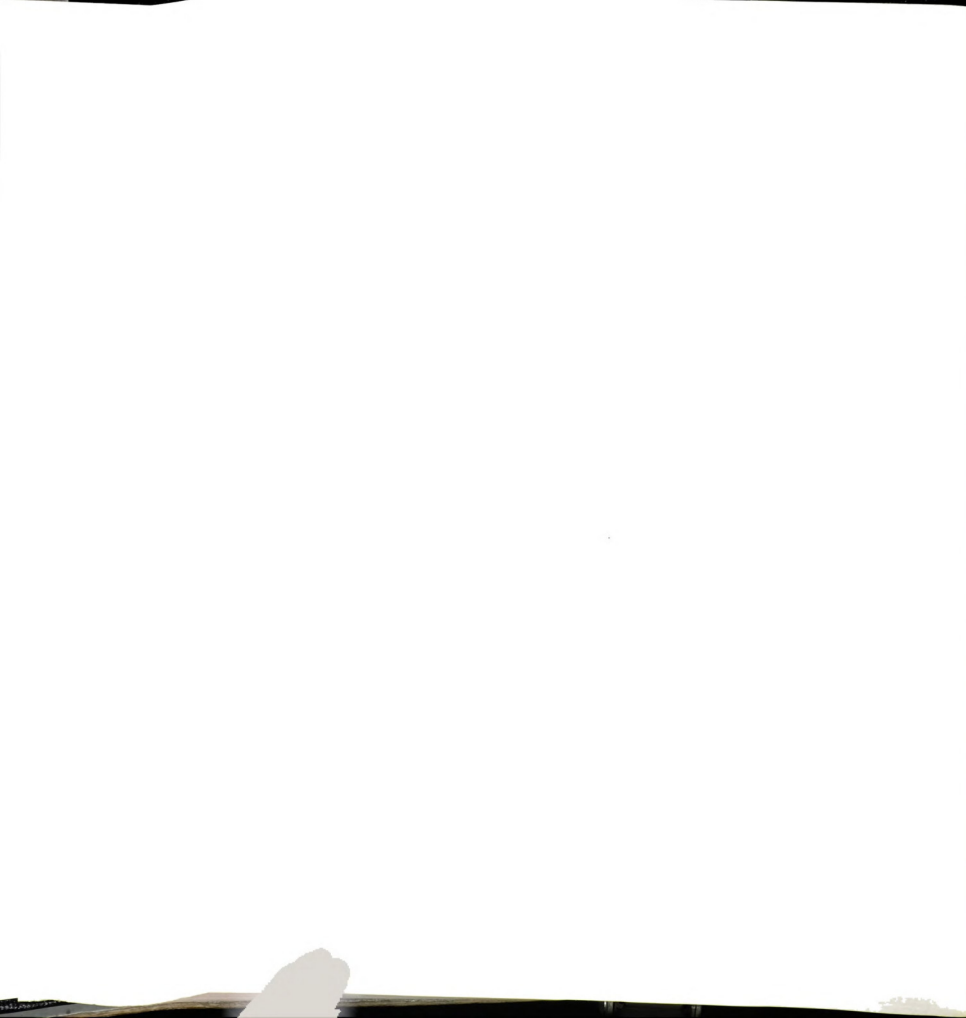
warmth, homeliness, and tranquillity will have to spend most of their time” (Bauman 2001:14-15).

VIII. Concluding Remarks

As we have seen in detail throughout this chapter, efforts to organize community associations in exile has been an important dimension of both the Eritrean state’s trans/national agenda and that of Eritreans in the United States. On the one hand, conflicts related to the production and redefinition of national identity in Eritrea and exile have been factors in the community’s inability to form a sustainable community association. On the other, the one-party state’s attempt to utilize the same trans/national logic and practices that EPLF mapped out with its mass organizations during the liberation war has provoked resistance among those who seek autonomy in defining their own relationships to Eritrea and ways of being Eritrean. Not least of all is the very real need among Eritreans for functioning institutions that contend first and foremost with the realities of American society. Eritreans remain torn between the desire -- and the state’s demands -- to remain deeply connected and active in Eritrean society, especially at times of crisis at home, and at the same time to construct institutions that sustain their lives, needs, and changing identities in America.

These contradictory impulses, and the way in which state-sponsored trans/national discourse and administration have been heavily responsible for the weakness of Eritrean communities like that of Chicago, push Eritreans in exile (including those who support the government) to pursue novel interventions into the home society and alternative templates for describing and envisioning their changing relationship with the state. Just as the Eritrean one-party state, and the EPLF before it, used conditions associated with globalization to forge and exploit a trans/nationalist social field for the benefit of the revolution and nation-building project, Eritrean citizens at home and abroad have also begun doing the same. Within the interstices of the state’s existing parameters for proper

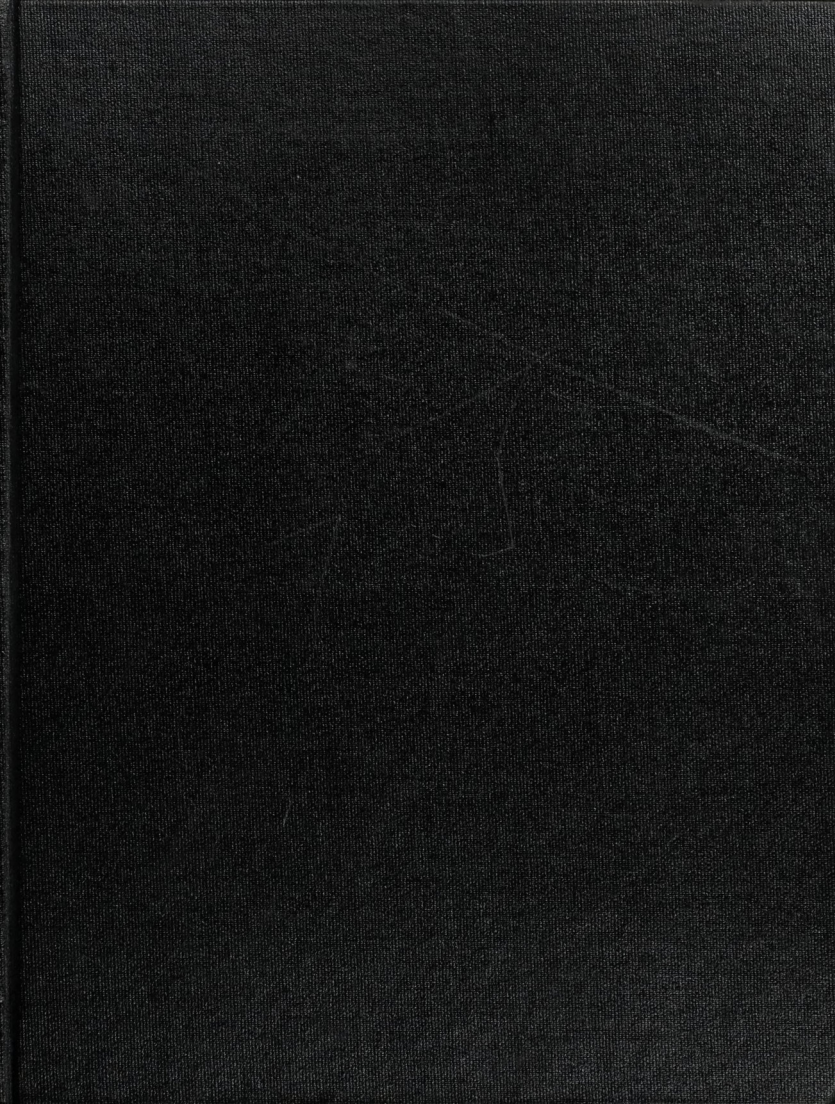
citizenship, national identity, and forms of association, Eritreans have located spaces in the trans/national social field for organization and that challenge or subvert the state's objectives and control. Moreover, in their quest for new meaning systems which can accommodate a broader array of interests and identities, Eritreans at home and abroad have drawn upon the internationalist concepts to which they are exposed in the west and applied them to Eritrea's realities. In the third and final part of this study, we will explore the shape, scope, and consequences of these trans/national interventions, and why concepts like democracy and civil society are being applied by Eritreans to existing nationalist approaches. We will also assess how the Eritrean trans/nation, in its simultaneous support and resistance for the Eritrean state, itself represents a kind of "trans/national civil society," and what this suggests about the dilemmas facing emergent nation-states in an era of globalization.



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ERITREA AND EXILE:
TRANS/NATIONALISM IN THE HORN OF AFRICA AND THE UNITED STATES

VOLUME II

By

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A DISSERTATION

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Part Three

Nationalist States, Transnational Societies

Only in the state does man have a rational existence. . .
Man owes his entire existence to the state, and has his being within it alone.
Whatever worth and spiritual reality he possesses are solely by virtue of the state.

G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*

As if I were a river
The harsh age changed my course,
Replaced one life with another,
Flowing in a different channel
And I do not recognize my shores.

Anna Akhmatova, *As if I were a River*



I. Trans/National Genesis

Since the inception of Eritrea's nationalist movement, practices and identities today associated with the concept of transnationalism have been central to the emergence and shaping of the nation-state and its exile communities around the world. In the 1970s and '80s, these practices gradually coalesced under the leadership of EPLF to form a web of relationships and material flows that connected Eritreans throughout the world to one another and to the revolution itself. At the same time, as chapters three and four revealed, the EPLF's increasing authority in the administration and discursive production of nationalism engendered power struggles among exiles and between the EPLF leadership and the growing Eritrean diaspora.

While the most perilous fractures have occurred along the lines of political identity, the construction of nationalism has also entailed debates about the place of sub-national identities like religion, gender, region/ethnicity, kinship, and generation. In chapters one and two of this study, we saw how (post)colonial legacies and traditional solidarities bedeviled the early nationalist movement and the Eritrean Liberation Front in particular. Chapter three continued that story to reveal how the contradictions between these traditional patterns and the quest for modern nationhood culminated in the birth of EPLF out of ELF, civil war between the fronts, the mass exodus of countless Eritreans, and the rise of a worldwide diaspora.

As sole custodians of the nationalist revolution and eventually the independent state, EPLF thus confronted the daunting task of not only producing and solidifying a unified body politic out of a history colored by socio-cultural and political sectarianism, but also building a brand-new state from the thickened ashes of war, poverty, famine, and dislocation. And as if the situation in Eritrea were not staggering enough, EPLF also faced overseeing the reproduction of nationalist commitment and its associated

trans/national practices among diverse and restive exiles, many of whom desired an even closer relationship with EPLF, and others who resisted its authority.

From the early days of Eritrea's revolution to a decade beyond its independence, it seems this task has only grown more complex, reminding us that all cultural production -- and perhaps that of modern national identity especially -- is "to some extent a homogenizing process which is intrinsically incomplete and noncompletable" (Williams 1991:xiv). For the vigilant and the anxious alike, moreover, the concomitant project of naturalizing common understandings, linking them to public and private conduct, and convincing people that they, in turn, shall be guaranteed certain rights and provisions as citizens or subjects -- in other words, producing hegemony -- also appears perpetually inchoate (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mamdani 1996; Williams 1991). Despite decades of mobilization and a record of remarkable success, EPLF's nationalism and authority remain vulnerable, and many former sources of strength have become unpredictable, potential liabilities. Perhaps none more so than the now tangled, trans/national web first woven at a time when states were states, diasporas clamored for a homeland, and the world according to the Cold War seemed a comparatively simpler place.

Throughout the dissertation thus far, I have explored the ways in which the trans/national project under EPLF (and now PFDJ) has become a battleground, an arena of contestation in which struggles over national identity, belonging, and authority are played out among exiles as well as between the Eritrean state and its populations abroad. Indeed, these contestations, which are both discursive and heady as well as practically embedded in "the imponderabilia of everyday life," to borrow a phrase from Malinowski, take place within that very web of trans/national relations initiated by EPLF in its relations with EFLNA and other mass organizations three decades ago. While still a locus for EPLF/PFDJ's enduring power, that web has more recently taken on a life of its own | and now spins itself in unanticipated ways.

While the pattern of trans/national state control under EPLF was already emerging in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when EPLF's mass organizations around the world were reaching their height, this project became much more complicated following large-scale resettlement of Eritrean refugees in the West. A new need arose to begin incorporating those not already within the fold of the front, or sometimes openly hostile to it, as we saw in the post-1989 struggle over "communities" in exile. Following independence, the flows between Eritrea and exile began both increasing and defying easy control and regulation, especially with the advent of the Internet as a tool for communication and mobilization. The building blocks of the trans/national social field, mass organizations and the chapters of EPLF and later the PFDJ, became but features in a rapidly expanding landscape as Eritreans abroad developed other expressions of their ongoing relationship to Eritrea, such as religious bodies, kin networks, non-governmental organizations, and Internet-based communities or associations. In response, the state has continued to propagate its homogenizing, synthetic nationalism to encourage consensus rather than fragmentation, and to block certain identities and forms of intervention by exiles into local Eritrean society. In addition to drawing resources from exiles, now in the form of an annual 2% state tax levied on each Eritrean citizen regardless of place of residence, the state also demands compliance according to the rule of trans/national engagement it has established in exchange for citizenship rights and national belonging.

Whereas the trans/nationalist revolution in the 1970s and much of the 1980s was characterized by well-oiled and disciplined mass organizations functioning in complementary roles all over the world beneath the EPLF's leadership, the 1990s ushered in a host of relationships that have often challenged the one-party state's control and authority, complicated the (re)production of nationalist identity and practices, and threatened to dilute or redirect the political and economic commitments so carefully cultivated in years previous. The contemporary Eritrean trans/nationalist social field has thus become uneven in its development and institutionalization, full of both structural

dead-ends and surprising penetrations, overlapping elements and subversive projects. And while the state's power endures over its deterritorialized "flexible citizens" (Ong 1999) in important ways, the complexification of the trans/national social field has also given rise to debates, practices, and identities that expose the inability of revolutionary-era nationalism to provide an encompassing narrative and model of citizenship for all Eritreans. Contemporary developments in Eritrea and exile, and especially the deployment of ideas and practices associated with civil society and democracy, attest to the ways in which Eritreans have begun re-envisioning national identity and the relationship between state and society in a firmly established but dynamic trans/national context.

II. Approaches and Arguments

Part III of this dissertation further probes the contemporary relationship between the nationalist state of Eritrea and its trans/national society to better understand the dilemmas facing emergent nation-states in the era of globalization, and post-colonial African nation-states in particular. While maintaining the ethnographic intimacy that characterizes the previous chapters, Part III also draws out important analytical patterns in a more rigorous and systematic fashion, relating the Eritrean case to key debates in several different bodies of literature and disciplines.

Eritrea and exile co-inhabit one another with the all the intensity and ambivalence that should be expected given the tangled history of the nationalist movement, the long-awaited attainment of statehood in 1993, and the related dynamics structuring migration. In chapter five, I unpack this co-inhabitation through a critical analysis of the different structural components that comprise the contemporary Eritrean trans/nationalist social field. These components include the EPLF and PFDJ government; NUEYS and NUEW; the Orthodox, Catholic, and Pentecostal churches; indigenous non-governmental organizations; networks of kin and close friends; the Internet; and, finally, organizations



that represent oppositional political platforms and human/civil rights agendas. All are significant *in situ* as well as methodologically. Each one of these components represents a node in my field research as well as a connective thread that links Eritrea and exile at one or more levels.

Chapter six moves beyond the details of the Eritrean trans/nationalist social field to explore its broader implications for the Eritrean nation-state as a globally-situated entity. Specifically, I develop a conception of trans/national civil society (Ferme 1999; Guyer 1994; Kaldor 1999) that accounts for the ways in which discourses and practices associated with civil society, democracy, and rights -- both in the US itself as well as globally -- interact with nationalist agendas and states like Eritrea's. In my usage, Eritrean trans/national civil society represents a cultural process as well as a political project (Kaldor 1999), in which dominant global constructs of governance and civic action take on new meanings vis-à-vis the history of nationalism and the politics of migration. These meanings and their associated practices penetrate and respond to local Eritrean society via the unevenly developed trans/nationalist social field, where they also collide with official forms of nationalism and the one-party state's power and authority. Drawing upon a nuanced formulation of civil society first implied by Gramsci (1971) and later by Burawoy (2001), Comaroff and Comaroff (1999), Ehrenberg (1999), Hall (1996), Kasfir et al (1998), Monga (1996) and others, I view trans/national civil society as the major location where the Eritrean state's power -- administrative, military, and discursive -- is simultaneously reproduced and challenged by Eritreans all over the world as they participate in the trans/nationalist social field encompassing Eritrea and exile.

Amongst a significant portion of Eritrean people both at home and abroad, the terms "democracy" and "civil society" have become particularly salient (if not always sayable) as they wrestle with EPLF/PFDJ's nationalist legacy and envision Eritrea's present and future place in a global system of nation-states. For within that system, features like democracy and civil society are no longer seen as belonging to the western

Enlightenment project but rather, under conditions of globalization, have taken on polysemic qualities, enabling their deployment as flexible templates that can be adopted to non-western socio-cultural and political systems (see Casanova 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Gledhill 1994; Kaldor 1999; Monga 1996). Thus, the notion of trans/national civil society helps us better understand both the impacts and consequences of transnationalism on particular states and societies, as well as how those states and societies relate to one another in increasingly transnationalizing contexts. Finally, it allows us to theorize the special and rather liminal space Eritreans in exile seem to occupy. Prevented from sufficiently “reterritorializing” (Louie 1999) in places like the United States, and similarly blocked from fully reintegrating into the home society, they nonetheless remain active participants in both American and Eritrean socio-political and cultural realities, seeking to apply lessons from both in their relationships to each.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ties That Bind and Sometimes Choke: The Eritrean Trans/National Social Field

1. Through The Looking-Glass

Wintertime in Eritrea is known as *keremti* [ክረምቲ], the rainy season. Across the highland plateau, where the capital city of Asmara reclines in modest beauty, the hotter, dryer months of January through June soon give way to the downpours and chilly dusks and dawns of July through December. The *keremti* rains, which tend to come once a day, can be dramatic and unforgiving. In Asmara, flash floods can overwhelm the rudimentary sewer systems, sending cars, people, and furniture floating down the streets and setting the waterlogged city aglow in candlelight against the ensuing blackout. In the countryside, the deluges slough away carefully planted seeds, washing away days or weeks of labor in a single afternoon. But the water also nourishes: the delectable, seasonal cactus fruit called *beles* [በለለ] grows fat and ripe, forming orangey bulbs along the edges of spiky paddles, filling countless baskets and lining young sellers' pockets with coins and crumpled *nakfa* [ናፕቶ].

Keremti also brings *beles* of another kind, and blessings as mixed as those of the rain. In the weeks leading up to May 24th, Eritrean Independence Day, familiar faces from distant lands begin descending from the sky in their own torrential downpour, flooding Asmara and trickling out towards other regions of the country. These *beles* -- the diaspora men, women, and children who come from places like Stockholm, London, Frankfurt, Sydney, Rome, Jeddah, Toronto, Dubai, Amsterdam, and Chicago -- soon swell the streets, cafes, shops, and bars of Asmara with the distinctive languages, cultural tastes, and ideas of their adopted countries. Those with a prior lifetime in Eritrea also

come bearing intensely recalled personal histories, and oftentimes unrelinquished grievances, that churn in their hearts together with the delirious joy of homecoming.

While their parents revel in their cultural re-immersion, savoring long hours over *shahi* and *boon*¹ in relatives' homes, seeking out with moistened eyes the places still animated in memories, young people form groups according to language and country of residence, talking and joking in tongues only peppered with Tigrinya words. They crowd the broad steps of Catedrale, the central Catholic Church on Liberation Avenue, or stake out particular cafes and streetcorners, eyeing one another and their local peers, earning the nickname *halewuti*, guardians of the streets. Cappuccino machines hiss double-time and tables are scarce in the most popular cafes, many of which are owned by returned or transmigrating exiles. Public buses are overcrowded and taxis overpriced, provoking bitter complaints from locals who must walk instead. Business booms for photo studios, as whole families dress up in the traditional clothing of different ethnic groups, or strike fashion poses for up and coming Asmarino photographers. Exclusive nightclubs gather together the hottest acts from Eritrea and exile and charge entrance fees equivalent to a month's salary for locals in National Service. Skimpily-clad girls in platform shoes and disaffected boys in baseball caps and droopy jeans scandalize local elders, while their peers who have never left Eritrea gaze at them with a mixture of yearning fascination and vicarious shame. Young diaspora women demurely turn away the few local men with the confidence to approach them, giggling and pulling faces at one another between puffs on a cigarette, while former guerrilla fighters search for young, traditional-minded brides to carry off to their lives abroad.

Not unlike the relationship between the Eritrean state and diaspora, the interactions between visiting exiles and local residents are redolent with contradictions. Locals criticize the perceived extravagance and lack of modesty among exiles from the

¹ *Shahi*: spiced black tea with sugar; *boon*: traditional, ceremoniously prepared coffee.

west (and the United States in particular), the scarcity and inaffordability of transportation and housing whenever exiles are involved, and the shaky linguistic and cultural skills of most children who have been raised abroad. Exiles bemoan the difficulties they face in the Eritrean bureaucracy, Asmara's chaotic traffic patterns, the lack of customer service, poor sanitation or hygiene, and the interminably slow pace of everything (not least of all the Internet connections). At the same time, however, local Eritreans relish the time they spend with family and friends visiting from abroad, and depend upon them for financial help, scarce resources, and a broader view of Eritrea and the rest of the world. In turn, visiting exiles delight in every detail of local life, explore with wonder everything and everyone around them, share generously of their relative prosperity, and seem to take ironic pleasure in the very things that offend their acquired foreign sensibilities.

For the Eritrean government and other institutions, such as Unions (former mass organizations), religious bodies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the *beles* season also requires accommodations. Government officials and civil servants make efforts (sometimes grudgingly) to expedite the business transactions of those with limited time in the country, trying to bridge the chasm between high expectations and low capacities. To their chagrin, they also find themselves receiving unsolicited advice on how things could work more efficiently. Many visiting exiles arrive with big plans for projects or businesses they would like to initiate, or skills they wish to contribute to existing institutions during the few weeks or months they spend in Eritrea. While some succeed in their goals, many more are frustrated by the inability or unwillingness of the Eritrean state and economy to absorb them. They wonder aloud about the nontransparent reasons: Is it bureaucratic red tape? Not "the right time"? One's previous known political affiliation or current one? A past shortcoming in one's "contributions," either financial or ideological? A sense communicated by authorities that "foreign" economic or cultural patterns introduced by exiles will corrupt local Eritrean society? While the Eritrean state needs its citizens in exile, and has since the 1970s nurtured structures to maintain their

participation, it often appears aloof and impenetrable towards even its most loyal supporters.

Other institutions also struggle to build consensus among Eritreans of diverse backgrounds and experiences. Locals and exiles alike desire effective and mutually integrating bridges, but find their efforts complicated at every turn by proliferating interests and identities. Within the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) and the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS), differences among local constituents related to class, education, religion, or ethnicity, as well those associated with exile subjectivity, occupy minds and agendas. Cultural and linguistic gaps between locals and their diaspora counterparts can be very acute, while clashing constructions of traditional, revolutionary, and diasporic gender roles add further complexity to NUEW's and NUEYS's tasks. Additionally, many Eritreans both at home and abroad are undergoing changes in religious beliefs and practices, putting pressure upon clergy in Eritrea to respond to their needs and posing new challenges for burgeoning religious institutions in diaspora. In turn, religious bodies continue to strive for their social space and autonomy vis-à-vis an often hostile and always vigilant state. Clearly, independent Eritrea finds itself amidst dramatic social changes associated with its trans/national realities, ones that make those of the revolution appear almost simple by comparison.²

In this context, Eritrea-based institutions like Unions, religious bodies, and NGOs have recently been formulating plans to help fulfill their mandates -- based upon that of mass organizations during the revolution -- as integrating mechanisms for local and exile sectors of Eritrean society. But perhaps even more important is that such institutions, and their constituents, remain attentive to the state's needs, policies, and parameters for

² Isayas Afwerki, the President of Eritrea, recognized this clearly himself. He is quoted as saying of the post-war period, "It's not like the liberation war, where you have one major obstacle and other problems are simply secondary. . . Now it's completely different. You have to face challenges in all directions, and their magnitude is tremendous in terms of the frustrating effect on what you want to do and what you can do" (Connell 1997:281).

acceptable civic activity. These policies and parameters are still largely determined by the same nationalist logic that drove the revolution beneath EPLF, and are even more contested today than they were in the 1970s and 80s. Thus, while chapters three and four showed how the proto-state under EPLF established an administrative presence abroad by forging a trans/national social field subject to its own authority, this chapter details the dilemmas now faced by that state as exiles have utilized existing trans/national avenues, and created new ones, according to their own interests. And just as the state under EPLF struggled to deflect those exile impulses that conflicted with its nationalist goals in the 1970s and 80s, today it manipulates notions of proper citizenship -- linked to its synthetic form of national identity -- in order to protect itself from the dangers of "foreign" ideas, oppositional identities, and their trans/national claims to belonging and social power.

In the pages that follow, I explore the different components of the contemporary Eritrean trans/national social field, including the one-party state under PFDJ, Unions of women and youth, religious bodies, and NGOs, and their interrelated roles in the Chicago community and local Eritrean society. I also address the role of the Internet and informal kin-based linkages. While acting as connective threads across borders, these trans/national structures and the content of their flows between Eritrea and exile also reveal subversive and contradictory elements. Within the trans/national social field as a whole, power struggles between the one-party state and non-state institutions and individuals are continually taking place, shaping both the Chicago community as well as Eritrea itself. An ethnographic exploration of these encounters helps us see more clearly what I referred to in chapter four as trans/national dissonance: the way in which trans/national practices, relationships, and institutions enable new forms of participation and citizenship, while at the same time prevent or disable certain identities, practices, interventions, and institutions.

This trans/national dissonance relates on the one hand to the Eritrean state's administrative interventions into most spheres of Eritrean trans/national life and the

aggressive propagation of its own nationalist agendas among an often resistant citizenry. One the other, it is visible in the state's obvious efforts to block particular kinds of social remittances (Levitt 2001) from entering local society while also encouraging other more agreeable forms of exile political-economic and cultural participation. But most importantly, an analysis of the dual nature of trans/nationalism in the Eritrean context -- at once emancipatory and enabling while also limiting and repressive -- provides us with a foundation for understanding how and why ideas and practices associated with democracy and civil society have become important to Eritreans in recent years, and how through their own efforts to support and resist the state, Eritreans in exile have come to form a kind of trans/national civil society for that state. The latter is the subject of the final chapter of this study.

II. The Ties That Bind: From Unions and the State to Kinship and Cyberspace

II.i.i. Mass organizations after Independence

The role of the mass organizations of students, women, workers and youth/students in the Eritrean trans/nationalist revolution is already familiar to us. The National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS), created by EPLF in 1978, and the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), created in 1979, endeavored to coordinate the activities and identities of their worldwide members on behalf of the revolution under EPLF.³ Following a period of transition that partly coincided with the controversial dissolution of all EPLF mass organizations in 1989-1990 (see chapter four), both NUEYS and NUEW re-emerged in the mid and late 1990s, respectively, with revised mandates. In the case of NUEW, the organization defined itself in the post-independence period as a "self-financing, autonomous social movement" (Connell

³ NUEYS originally formed in 1978 as the Association of Eritrean Students (AES). In 1987, at EPLF's Second Congress, it became the National Union of Eritrean Students (NUES), and in 1994 became the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS). In this chapter I refer to it only as NUEYS for the sake of clarity.

2001:116), while NUEYS asserted itself as “an independent, non-governmental youth and students’ organization.”⁴ For NUEYS, the transition after independence was rather concise. Following a two-year reorganization effort, from 1992-1994, the union held a landmark congress in 1994 in which it rearticulated its identity, objectives, and goals. The National Union of Eritrean Women, for its part, held its fourth congress in 1992, at which time it relaunched itself, but did not fully reorganize and elect a new leadership until its fifth congress in 1998. Both organizations have continued to define themselves as coordinating and integrating mechanisms between Eritrea and its worldwide diasporas.

Today, NUEYS has approximately 135,000 members in Eritrea and 15,000 members abroad, and NUEW claims well over 200,000 members total. Both recognize their twin roots in both Eritrea and exile. The roles associated with their local and diaspora constituencies, however, are no longer as easily reconciled as they were during the years of the revolution, when a single ultimate goal -- that of independence from Ethiopia -- helped unite the visions and objectives of a diverse and far-flung people. First and foremost, the relationship of NUEYS and NUEW to the one-party state remains ambiguous at best, continuing to mirror their relationships with EPLF during the revolution (see Pool 2001:180). While both Unions have declared themselves independent non-governmental organizations, they continue to share very strong ties to, and receive direction from, the PFDJ party. During my field research, I repeatedly heard NUEYS privately described as “the pinkie finger of the government,” while critics of NUEW and former disillusioned members have complained that the women’s association remains much more accountable to the PFDJ party than to its own constituents. Even in its advocacy efforts, NUEW tends to rely more on “private diplomacy over public protest” (Connell 2001:116).

⁴ NUEYS information pamphlet, Asmara, January 2000.

The strong ties of both NUEYS and NUEW to the PFDJ party have alienated some at home and abroad, despite being frequently denied by those who insist the Unions are bonafide non-governmental organizations. Connell (2001:117) notes that many women formerly active in NUEW during the revolution abandoned it after independence because it seemed insufficient in its empowerment techniques and insensitive towards differences among women. In particular, NUEW seemed hostile towards middle-class professional women while favoring poor and rural women, a factor which later discouraged many skilled women in the diaspora from working with the Union on projects they wished to initiate. Moreover, it seemed heavily overburdened by its mandate to confront every issue affecting women, from child care, literacy, and job training, to income generation, and health care (Connell 2001:117). Yet, when other indigenous women's organizations formed to help diversify efforts at advocacy and development, they soon were shut down by both NUEW and PFDJ (Connell 1997:300-302). Similarly, women active within trade unions and the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW) met with resistance from both NUEW and the government in 1996 when they formed a women's committee to work on issues such as child care in the factory workplace (Connell 2001:121).

While NUEYS also shares important ties to the PFDJ party, which inevitably restricts the form and range of its advocacy, it has nonetheless taken up more sensitive issues than NUEW, including female genital cutting and sex education for the prevention of unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV/AIDS (see Connell 1997; 2001). Many of the Union's more politically savvy constituents nonetheless begrudge the role NUEYS plays in supporting (rather than challenging) government policy, including its complicity with increasingly unpopular but mandatory summer work programs, military training, and National Service. Like NUEW, NUEYS and the government have aggressively thwarted other independent organizing among students. In July 2001, for example, an independent student union at the University of Asmara crumbled after its

president, Semere Kesete, publicly criticized the summer work programs and the government's involvement in the university administration. Semere Kesete was imprisoned, and when students gathered outside the courthouse in concern and peaceful protest, hundreds were arrested. Within days, all university students were ordered to gather in the stadium prior to being bussed to workcamps in the hot, lowland regions. Throughout the entire episode, which left lasting shockwaves through Asmara for many months, NUEYS remained silent except for its support for the government's actions.

Despite the necessarily restricted agendas of NUEW and NUEYS, which tend to operate more like "government-organized nongovernmental organizations" (GONGOs) than NGOs, both Unions continue to do very important work on behalf of their constituents. NUEW defines its mission around "emancipation through equal participation,"⁵ while NUEYS includes in its list of objectives and activities numerous and multi-dimensional undertakings. These include "building the youth that safeguard the sovereignty of their nation, [and] retain their culture and identity; preparing the youth to retain the achievements of the martyrs and pass it along to the coming generations; supporting and promoting the rights and equality of women and fight[ing] against negative gender perceptions; lobbying for children's rights; the promotion of national unity, tolerance, and respect for principles of democracy and Human Rights; respect the law and order, and accept the principles of fairness, equality, and unity in everyday life," as well as providing recreational, educational, and vocational outlets and training for young men and women ages 16-35.⁶ To a great extent, NUEW and NUEYS thus remain responsible for discursively and practically maintaining the social philosophies and transformations instituted by EPLF during the independence struggle itself. They also work to fashion among their constituents the right kinds of national subjects: women who

⁵ "National Union of Eritrean Women," Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Association (ERRA), August-September 1994, reprinted from *The Horn of Africa Bulletin* vol. 6, no. 5, September-October 1994

⁶ NUEYS information pamphlet, Asmara, January 2000.

are gender-conscious, effective, and self-reliant producers for reconstruction and nation-building, and obedient youth whose love of education, work, and discipline will carry the tradition of the militant *tegadelti* into the era of new development.

II.i.ii. NUEW and NUEYS as Trans/National Bodies

Since the late 1990s, NUEW and NUEYS have both been developing their post-independence capacities within the trans/national social field. With long histories of mobilization in exile on behalf of the nationalist movement, both NUEW and NUEYS enjoy a great deal of legitimacy among Eritreans, even those who are critical of the EPLF or PFDJ party. Less certain, however, is how their simultaneous roles in Eritrea and exile fit together. Both organizations seem to act in three capacities: as advocacy and service organizations for Eritreans at home and abroad; as integrating mechanisms between these two populations; and, less overtly, as arenas for the reproduction of EPLF/PFDJ's definitions of national subjectivity. Also at issue is how the Unions' lack of real autonomy from the one-party state shapes their agendas and activities within those multiple capacities. In the pages that follow, I analyze the structural features of the Unions' location in the trans/national social field and the kinds of strategies pursued both in Eritrea and exile to meet the goals of both the Unions themselves and the one-party state.

Because of their long history as sites of socio-political mobilization in exile and their close relationships with first the EPLF and later the PFDJ party, NUEW and NUEYS remain the most well-developed components of the Eritrean trans/national social field. Inheriting much of their current structure and ideology from the days of the revolution, the Unions' constituents are also clearly defined by EPLF/PFDJ. Unlike other populations, such as religious or ethno-regional populations, women and youth have long been understood within EPLF's nationalist framework as oppressed social groups whose identities are more universal -- cutting across religious and ethno-regional lines, for

example -- and therefore important to mobilize on the bases of the lowest common denominators of gender and age. With support from the one-party state and enduring linkages to it through a shared revolutionary history, NUEW and NUEYS have been officially sanctioned in their efforts to remain organizing and mobilizing forces within Eritrea and exile.

Both NUEYS and NUEW have only recently begun crafting their post-independence roles in the Eritrean trans/national social field. Although NUEYS underwent reorganization in 1994, the Foreign Relations department, which is responsible for all administrative issues and projects related to the diaspora, did not emerge until 1998. Staffed by three dedicated young adults, NUEYS Foreign Relations department shoulders a daunting responsibility. In addition to communicating directly with NUEYS's many regional headquarters around the world to coordinate the activities of diaspora chapters, the Foreign Relations department also plans and executes projects that bring together the energies and resources of local and diaspora youth during the May-September *beles* season in particular. Since 1999, these have included an array of projects that express NUEYS's simultaneous roles in local Eritrean society, in diaspora communities, and as a conduit of cultural, economic, and technological exchange.

One of NUEYS-Asmara's most visible recent accomplishments has been coordinating the shipments of dozens of refurbished computers from NUEYS-Boston and securing the expertise and labor of several diaspora volunteers to help set up and train local technicians at the extremely popular Shebab Internet Cafe, operated by NUEYS at its main compound. With the lowest rates for Internet use per hour and one of the most attractive cyber-cafe atmospheres available in Eritrea, Shebab allows Eritreans to conduct research, communicate with friends and family around the world, access international news media, and become otherwise well-versed in the technologies and cultural melanges associated with globalization. On any given day, hundreds of mostly young people gather to wait for a turn on a computer, sipping cappuccino or Coca-Cola and leafing through

dictionaries, encyclopedias, or western fashion magazines while they wait, surrounded by original paintings depicting images of technology and globalization.⁷ Shebab remains one of the most obvious manifestations of the relationship between Eritrean youth abroad and those at home.

Additionally, NUEYS Public Relations has worked on outreach activities with diaspora regional offices and on programs aimed at integrating visiting diaspora youth with their local peers. These efforts include helping to initiate new chapters abroad by communicating with regional headquarters in respective countries, organizing workshops and panel discussions on national unity and cultural conflict among diaspora and local youth, conducting travel outings for diaspora and local youth to experience different regions of the country together, and coordinating the participation of diaspora and non-Eritrean youth in the *keremtawi ma'etot* [ክረምታዊ ማእቶት], or student summer reconstruction projects.⁸ NUEYS Foreign Relations also plays a central role in helping to attract skilled Eritreans living abroad and placing them for various lengths of time within existing Eritrean institutions, many of them government ministries.

One of the most striking examples of the latter efforts originated with a young Chicago-based Eritrean named Negus Solomon who contacted NUEYS Public Relations department in Asmara, in hopes of securing their partnership for a project he had conceptualized. Slowly but surely, Project Eritrea 2001 (PE 2001) evolved through the combined efforts of Negus himself, NUEYS, PFDJ, and the University of Asmara. The objective of PE 2001 was to facilitate the integration of Eritreans (and others; one of the first volunteers was a white American) who plan to spend a season or even a year or more

⁷ One such painting features an image of planet Earth, the African continent front and center, connected to a computer terminal.

⁸ My own introduction to Eritrea and to NUEYS dates to my participation in an early version of this program in 1995, before NUEYS developed its Foreign Relations department. At that time, the program was arranged through a partnership between Operation Crossroads Africa, Inc. and the government of Eritrea, with NUEYS as the coordinating body responsible for placing our 7-person American team in a rural village and putting us to work with local Eritrean high school students from all over the country.

in Eritrea and would like to contribute to the country's overall development, but who lack the contacts and bureaucratic savvy to navigate Eritrea's incipient infrastructure. On the Asmara end, NUEYS officers contacted various ministries within the government and other institutions, including NUEYS itself, to find out what sorts of positions might be available. On the diaspora end, PE 2001's planner in Chicago set up a website where people could register and indicate what sort of skills and training they could offer. Working cooperatively with Negus Solomon in Chicago, the NUEYS officials in Asmara then matched those registered on the website with the job descriptions given by the ministries or other institutions, taking care of all necessary paperwork and other bureaucratic processes, so that when the individuals arrived they could immediately begin working. While PE 2001 did not attract many participants in its first season, the need clearly existed from the kinds of available positions compiled. The list of available jobs included an accountant, an economist/market researcher, a physical trainer, a nurse, an archivist, three female journalists, one or more fund-raising experts, a librarian, a health counselor, a computer specialist, and a managerial expert.

The effort exerted to develop a program like PE 2001 is not always matched by successful outreach work, however. While policies and agendas for the diaspora and its integration with local Eritrean society continue to evolve, so do techniques for outreach and information dissemination. In 2001, NUEYS decided to create small business-card sized advertisements for their *keremti* programs bringing together diaspora and local youth, which they placed at the customs desks at the Asmara airport in the expectation that arriving Eritreans would pick them up. This particular approach did not prove very successful. Nonetheless, NUEYS could boast rather high attendance at many of its events: 148 young people joined travel outings to different regions of the country, and almost as many attended a workshop in which four local panelists and four from different diaspora regions conducted a discussion about the kinds of cultural tensions prevalent

among youth from different backgrounds, and between diaspora and local youth in particular.

Compared to the role of student organizations during the years of the revolution, the contemporary manifestation of NUEYS abroad remains more attuned to diasporic realities, although still administered through the trans/national structure of NUEYS in Eritrea and therefore implicated in the kinds of results NUEYS-Asmara would like to achieve from this relationship. Similar to EFLNA during the 1970s, each diaspora region's headquarters is responsible for maintaining communication with the headquarters in Asmara, as well as facilitating the development of smaller chapters within the region. Local chapters are discouraged from communicating directly with the Asmara office and are required to use the proper avenue of the regional office first. Thus, all NUEYS chapters in the US and Canada communicate directly with the regional North American headquarters in Washington, DC, which acts as conduit with the office in Asmara. This lack of direct communication is often accompanied by a lack of clarity in terms of NUEYS-North America's (NUEYS-NA) role as a diaspora organization or as a transnational, Eritrea-oriented institution. While Foreign Relations officers of NUEYS-Asmara repeatedly told me that they encourage each diaspora chapter to have their own set of by-laws and to work within their communities to become locally-specific resources attuned to the issues facing the youth in that particular region, it is also very clear that they expect these diaspora chapters to play a role in Eritrea itself and to adhere to the larger goals of NUEYS-Asmara.

According to an information pamphlet published by NUEYS-NA, using the Washington DC chapter as an example, local chapters in the US and Canada organize annual workshops about the college application process and financial aid, create mentoring programs between college graduates and high school students, raise funds to help with social causes in Eritrea and in their local community, organize informational sessions about Eritrea, and plan special events like candlelight vigils and demonstrations

to raise consciousness about Eritrea in the US. Also listed as a “long run” goal is “to explore ways whereby youths can participate in short and long-term projects in Eritrea.”⁹ Thus, the apparent focus of NUEYS in North America appears to be concerned mostly with diaspora realities. Its structure remains trans/nationally fixed by Eritrean realities, however, creating a sense of ambiguity among its diaspora participants in particular. As we have seen for community associations, this is a common dilemma for institutional components of the Eritrean trans/national social field.

Like NUEYS, NUEW also lives with ambiguity in terms of its simultaneous roles and its ostensible autonomy from PFDJ. Connell (1997:267) notes that despite its 1998 reorganization, NUEW did not find itself radically restructured. Rather, it remained focused largely on supporting women with marriage and land reforms, political participation, skills and job training, and literacy, which highlighted the tension between the Union’s dual capacities as a popular movement of the revolution and an autonomous service organization (Connell 1997:267).

Moreover, NUEW’s slower reorganization and post-independence transformations presented a unique set of challenges regarding the role of diaspora constituents. According to Leul Gebreab, chairperson of NUEW in Asmara, the Union was so overwhelmed by post-independence concerns within Eritrea that they could simply not accommodate the additional perspectives of Eritrean women abroad, many of whom had become interested in what social or legal advocacy role NUEW could possibly play for them in their countries of settlement. At the NUEW’s fifth congress in 1998, where the Union officially underwent reorganization, the few diaspora representatives present pushed for their chapters and contributions to be placed on the agenda. Still vexed by the mass organization dissolution in 1989-1990, activists in NUEW chapters abroad seemed determined not to be left out. They argued that any positive outcomes achieved for

⁹ “About the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students in North America, Washington DC Chapter.” <http://denden.com.nueys/brochure.htm>

women in Eritrea would be related to the successes of Eritrean women abroad, who would continue to participate in Eritrean society whether they repatriated permanently or not, and would continue to support NUEW financially and in other ways. Thus, in 1998, chapters of NUEW in diaspora again began emerging and linking themselves to the Union's headquarters in Asmara. NUEW opened an office in Washington, DC with a permanent representative, and sent another organizer, Belaynesh Araya, to the various locations where Eritrean women had requested support from NUEW-Asmara. Leul Gebreab herself traveled to several countries in Europe and the Middle East, observing the conditions facing Eritrean women and speaking to them about the role of the Union.

Some of the efforts to reorganize NUEW diaspora chapters related to the eruption of the border war in 1998 between Eritrea and Ethiopia. In Chicago, this proved the major catalyst for the formation of NUEW-Chicago chapter. Infused with the renewed nationalist sentiment that surged among Eritreans of all backgrounds shortly after the war began, some women in the community also saw this as a chance to begin healing old wounds based on ELF-EPLF political identity by bringing women of different backgrounds together. The initiative started with a woman called Tereza, who had initially been affiliated with ELF, but whose political identity had shifted in the US through her exposure to pro-EPLF activism via the man she later married. Drawing upon the resurgent nationalism among Eritreans, as well as her own ability to navigate both sides of the political identity rift, Tereza convinced others that creating a chapter of NUEW in Chicago would benefit their own community as well as Eritrea. Another woman, Abrehet, explained to me the impulse behind forming NUEW-Chicago: "We started this women's association just to get together and help our country and to avoid the segregation between ELF and EPLF. That's our belief -- it has to be like Eritreans are one family. Especially after the Woyane problem [border war with Ethiopia], we started getting together and having a strong women's association that is joined by all ELF and

EPLF.” Many women, however, felt unsure of NUEW’s mandates and usefulness, given its history and close linkage with EPLF/PFDJ.

Although it started with over 50 women enlisting on paper, the NUEW chapter in Chicago dwindled within its first year to a core of about ten or twelve women, who met roughly once per month. During the meetings that I attended, I was struck by how much more attuned the women seemed to be towards the issues facing their own community than within Eritrea itself, although developments “back home” remained a constant referent. While the woman chairing the meeting referred several times to the mandates of the organization in Asmara (perhaps for my benefit), the actual focus of discussion remained largely on things like who would bring what dish for the upcoming party, what the last Internet news about the war with Ethiopia had reported, or who spoke with relatives in Eritrea most recently and what they said. Sipping tea and passing bread, informal chit-chat, and good-natured teasing and laughing made NUEW meetings frequently feel more like social gatherings than business meetings. One woman who seemed to attend meetings faithfully later confessed to me in a private interview that she was not really interested in NUEW itself, largely because she viewed it as a political organization and preferred to remain “outside the politics,” but simply wanted an additional opportunity to relax among her friends and peers on her one day off from work.

While not at all within the mandate of the organization, these social dimensions play an important role in the Chicago community, however, allowing women to come together despite certain potential barriers and share their everyday concerns. Indeed, one of the objectives of NUEW-Asmara for both local and diaspora women is to encourage them to share their personal problems and seek mutual support and solutions from one another. As Tereza and other NUEW members explained to me in interviews and in meetings, women should ideally discuss their work, home, childrearing, and health concerns with one another. “If someone knows what is cancer, or why a woman should have certain foods while she is pregnant, she should teach the rest of the women and help

them understand,” Tsehainesh told me. Similarly, NUEW-Asmara’s instructions that diaspora women should focus on children’s education and Eritrean cultural abilities led several Chicago women to begin providing Tigrinya language instruction during church Sunday School and holding ceremonies recognizing the achievements of youngsters from kindergarten through college.

NUEW remains an important trans/national body, however, and most women continue to view its significance in terms of what it can accomplish for Eritrea. Tereza explained how the trans/national relationship with NUEW-Asmara was being worked out, and just what Chicago members would be doing when things were “up and running” effectively:

Hamad’ie [NUEW], yes, that’s the women’s organization, the main one is in Asmara. We are just a branch. We still have connections, like what is going on in Asmara, what they are doing in Asmara. . . Like, if they are needing help -- and not just in Asmara. In all the states. We have 22 chapters in the US. So we call one another about what we are doing, and we have the main office in Washington, DC. We connect with that one so she can connect with Asmara, or we can connect with Asmara. Then, what we do is, we report to them what we did here, like did we start a youth group, or have language classes, or helping teach each other about health. Or, if they need something in Asmara, like make donations for a project, we do that too. This time we have a problem in Eritrea with ultrasound. Like, we don’t have any ultrasound and women in Eritrea are dying because of this. . . . So we can help with that project. Like in a meeting [in Asmara], they will say, ‘Chicago, will you do that one,’ like in the future or whatever. . . . Then we would start researching, maybe go to other organizations, African organizations, or to women in another place, or ask a person like you to go find us help in other places or organizations. We can collect some funds and send it back home.

Whether the particular project Tereza mentioned ever became a reality, the intention of NUEW in Asmara appeared to be harnessing the support of women abroad to work within their own communities and societies of settlement on projects planned by NUEW within Eritrea. One such way women in diaspora could become effective members of the Union was to become more familiar and civically-engaged with the surrounding American communities in which they lived, as well as helping to inculcate their children with values and cultural attributes that both distinguished them as Eritrean and identified their cultural heritage to themselves and others as positive. This approach,

like so many other features of Eritrean trans/national relationships, seemed imbued with a certain tension, one that simultaneously encouraged Eritreans to become more acculturated to their societies of settlement in ways that could benefit Eritrea, but at the same time to preserve and reproduce cultural and national identity in ways that would insure continued participation of diaspora Eritreans in local Eritrean society. Leul Gebreab of NUEW-Asmara illustrated this tension in her explanation of the Union's expectations for Eritrean women abroad:

Now we have to look at all the things we geared toward Eritrea, and how to gear them towards women in diaspora also. . . . Women did everything towards the resources for the front [EPLF]. But do they know their environments? We could have a kind of "know your environment" program and arrange or organize a tour around a certain area -- for example, those living in the southern part of America would take a tour in an organized manner. Or hold a celebration for their children who have finished their high school degree. . . . So, how could we benefit from the situation that exists, and the different opportunities that exist in our different surroundings. . . . The other thing is, how can we really relate to the youngsters, communicate with the children. So this has to be discussed openly in the chapters, because our tradition is very secretive. If anything happens to my daughter, I might not want to discuss it. So the [NUEW] meetings have this meaning also. We have a good culture here, like we have this *ekub* [rotating mutual credit] and we need to have meetings to just raise up all of these issues, and then you are sane when you go back home. [Women in diaspora] should never consider that they are different from women in Eritrea. This is also a major objective we expect them to achieve.

In addition to NUEW advocating that women in diaspora know their surrounding communities and glean what they can from them for the benefit of Eritrea and especially Eritrean women, the Union also makes similar efforts for diaspora women when they visit Eritrea. Some of these efforts have included "know your environment" tours, in which NUEW organizes trips to various regions of the country, encouraging diaspora women to familiarize themselves with one another and with local women who are participating in NUEW's projects. In this way, NUEW hopes to generate more energy and funding for actual projects on the ground, that in turn gives diaspora NUEW members a chance to feel invested. However, just as NUEW has confronted some internal challenges from Eritrean women who would like to initiate independent organizations or projects without

necessarily going through NUEW, so too has the Union faced such competition from diaspora women who would like to work at a different pace and with greater independence than NUEW generally accommodates. To her great credit, Leul Gebreab seems to understand this dilemma of trans/national administration versus autonomy:

There are women who are saying they will organize themselves but will not be called after the NUEW chapters, but if we give them a project they will do it. So there is an NUEW chapter in Stockholm that has to accept the possibility of having another group that is working for women but is not necessarily behind all of the objectives of NUEW. But [NUEW members] say no, you have to be part of us or you should not be doing anything. . . . So how can we really convince them that you can have different kinds of organizational set-ups, and as long as they promote women's issues and the Eritrean issues, why should we really insist they have to be at the level of the National Union of Eritrean Women? These kinds of discussions are going on. And that issue, we are trying to entertain it, but it will take time also.

Both NUEYS and NUEW therefore maintain a very firm trans/national structure inherited from the days of the revolution, although the content of their relationships with their constituents has clearly grown far more complex and thus much less clear. Of particular interest and debate is palpable tension between maintaining and facilitating the ongoing integration of Eritreans in exile into local Eritrean society through both administrative procedures and nationalist ideology and praxis, and encouraging them to address their own particular needs in diaspora and seek out resources in societies of settlement. As it turns out, NUEYS and NUEW are by no means alone in this dilemma.

II.ii. The Front, the State, and the Party: From EPLF to PFDJ

II.ii.i EPLF Chapters in the 1980s

Similar to the way in which global mass organization chapters were incorporated into a central trans/national structure under EPLF's leadership, so too were chapters of the front itself set up around the world in the 1980s to strengthen communication and coordination between EPLF and its members and supporters. As I suggested in chapter four, however, opening such chapters was also an attempt to neutralize fractious political identities by increasing the presence of EPLF and its nationalist approach abroad. As

Hagos “Kisha” Gebrehiwet, former chairman of the National Union of Eritrean Students, EPLF officer in North America, and Eritrea’s first ambassador to the US explained to me:

[EPLF] was very concerned that everyone should feel part of the movement, so it was really working very hard from the field. There were people coming out of the field, visiting all these places, having meetings, going and meeting with Eritreans in different areas. . . . So you create people who are conscious everywhere. It was these people who worked together and created organizational support, like the students. . . . But after a stage, when it came to being one organization, it was much easier for EPLF’s central leadership to deal directly with things. . . . The main office was in Rome, and before that, Beirut, and before that, at an earlier stage also, in Sudan. . . . And at that [later] stage, economic activities were handled through Rome, the office there. And then we opened offices everywhere later on, EPLF offices in Rome, France, the UK, other places in Europe. Every office was handling what was being done in their regions and then sending it to the field.

In many ways, the kinds of activities these EPLF chapters engaged in did not seem altogether different from the kinds of things mass organizations had been doing for well over a decade. Given the major resettlement of Eritrean refugees abroad, many of them associated with ELF, it seems reasonable to imagine that EPLF chose to open chapters around the world to strengthen its trans/national administrative presence and draw individual citizens more firmly into its statelike orbit. Throughout the 1980s, EPLF chapters abroad indeed appeared to focus less on overt political work and more with relief measures and material support, to which many former ELF affiliates and non-members of EPLF gravitated. These efforts were coordinated with the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), which also opened worldwide chapters whose chief responsibility entailed mobilizing resources from NGOs in host countries. Again, Kisha describes what these early EPLF chapters did to support the struggle in the field:

Basically, we were buying a lot of stuff like clothes, books -- there was a need for books, especially later on -- or sending money so [EPLF] could buy food from Sudan and other places. There was no possibility for buying arms, and no money was used for arms. So our main support was the food and clothes and other items that were available in Sudan. There was an [EPLF] office there and they used the money for whatever was needed inside Eritrea.

Thus, when mass organizations were dissolved in 1989-1990, EPLF chapters abroad were able to take up much of the slack, as well as provide an even stronger sense

of involvement and ownership over the struggle for those in exile, perhaps offsetting some of the bitterness mass organization activists felt when their associations were shut down temporarily. It also helped maintain a level of mobilization, sacrifice, and commitment among Eritreans, including many who formerly supported ELF, upon the achievement of independence in 1991-1993. This gradual naturalization of EPLF's administrative presence in diaspora and its major efforts towards relief work helped the front earn trust among former opponents. Gebre, formerly a fighter with ELF, described how the EPLF chapters in the US were operating in the months leading up to liberation in 1991, and how it was perceived among former ELF members:

EPLF started recognizing the contributions of ELF members. Before, during the civil war, we were bandits, bad guys. . . . Later on, the entire thing changed. I remember the ELF martyrs were recognized, and September 1, the day the independence movement started [under ELF], was recognized. At some point, the issue of Idris Hamid Awate, in terms of the fight for independence, was under question. Was he a true liberation fighter or a bandit? . . . These are sensitive issues, and if [EPLF] wants to exploit or get the support of bigger Eritreans in the diaspora, they have to recognize these issues. They were very important to ELF members, and that brought some reconciliation between ourselves and EPLF. . . . And cadres, who were visiting and giving reports and speeches, giving an update of what's going on, giving political teachings and all that. . . everytime everyone comes in they start walking that fine line not to offend ELF. Which I think was a smart move. And what happened over the years was some of the ELF members began joining EPLF too.

By the time independence arrived, EPLF had succeeded in neutralizing at least some of the political identity conflicts in diaspora, setting the stage for the return of at least some exiles in the immediate period following liberation. Most people, however, both loyal EPLF members and those who did not join the front, remained abroad. And so did the new state, reshaping again its trans/national presence to keep Eritrean citizens oriented towards the nation-building process.

II.ii.ii From EPLF to PFDJ: A Trans/National Transition

Shortly after liberation in 1991, EPLF began a period of reorganization in which the front transformed itself into a government, the Peoples Front for Democracy and

Justice (PFDJ).¹⁰ As Pool (2001:162) notes, there were two phases of this transition: the first, in which the Provisional Government of Eritrea (PGE) took over administering the new country from independence until the completion of the national referendum process, and the second, in which the PFDJ was fashioned out of EPLF and embarked on the making of a new constitutional order. Even prior to the referendum process, however, the PGE announced the Citizenship Proclamation in 1992, which later became incorporated into the Constitution as Article 3. This proclamation extended equal citizenship rights to anyone born to one Eritrean parent anywhere in the world. However, as first the National Charter (1994) and later the Constitution (ratified in 1997) also stressed, the guaranteed rights of all citizens also entailed the fulfillment of those citizens' duties and obligations to their nation, families, and communities (see Connell 2001:348, Pool 2001:168).

The processes by which both the referendum on independence and the drafting of the Constitution took place evoked the same strategies of large-scale mass education and organizing used by EPLF throughout the struggle. Indeed, the transition from EPLF as a liberation front to the PFDJ as a government revealed at least as many consistencies between the two as marked differences (see Connell 2001; Pool 2001). The two-year, internationally-monitored referendum process, which garnered a 98.5% total voter turnout around the world (Pool 2001:162) and a 99.8% vote in favor of independence, indicated the near-unanimity of Eritreans on the issue of sovereignty and statehood.¹¹ The Constitutional process, overseen by the religiously, ethnically, and gender-balanced Constitutional Commission of Eritrea (CCE) and its advisories of foreign legal experts and local elders versed in customary law, also drew upon the familiar and

¹⁰ The front's transition to a government deserves a more complex treatment than possible here. Readers are directed towards Connell (1997, 2001); Pool (2001); and Tronvoll (1998 a, 1998b) for more thorough analyses.

¹¹ See Tronvoll 1996 for a critical analysis of the referendum process among the rural peasantry.

highly-localized processes of political education and democratic centralist debate throughout its drafting.¹²

During the initial phases of the Constitution's drafting, issues ranging from the difference between a presidential and parliamentary system, multi-partyism, and the role of the security apparatus and military, to the rights of women, the relationship between church and state, and international constructs like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on Peoples' and Human Rights, were discussed and debated in every urban community and small village, as well as over the radio and through theatrical performances (see Connell 2001:348). During the second phase, a draft of the Constitution was again discussed throughout the country as well as in diaspora communities worldwide and several adjustments made. Overall, the Eritrean Constitutional process was widely lauded as a radically-democratic approach to popular state-making and nation-building. As Pool (2001:166) has written, "In many ways, the constitution-making process was unique: political education and information at the rural grass roots level, serious debates and seminars in the urban centers. In the provinces and the capital, as well as in the capitals of Europe and the US where there were Eritrean communities, there was vigorous participation." Some of the most important areas of debate, moreover, had to do with the articulation of women's rights, whether to designate an official language, and presidential elections.

For the PFDJ itself, which simultaneously faced Eritrea's history of struggle and sectarianism as well as the task of creating everything from postage stamps to macro-economic policy from scratch, the central principle of national unity underpinned every decision, perspective, and approach. As Connell (2001), Pool (2001), and Tronvoll (1998a, 1998b) have all noted, there were six guidelines dominating the National Charter

¹² The CCE was led by the esteemed Eritrean lawyer, Dr. Bereket Habte-Selassie, a resident of the United States, and also included former individual members of ELF, largely drawn from those who had joined EPLF in 1981 or had returned to Eritrea at independence. No organized ELF groups were permitted to participate in any aspect of the constitutional and state-making processes, however (Pool 2001:166, 180).

and the Constitution, all of which stemmed quite clearly from the ideology and praxis of EPLF during the struggle. First and foremost was national unity itself, which the National Charter constructed in much the same way EPLF had done in its first document, “Our Struggle and Its Goals.” Seeking to “build a national government which. . . rejects all divisive attitudes and activities, places national interest above everything else and enables participation in all sectors of Eritrean society,” the PFDJ asserted that “All sectarian. . . tendencies must be. . . rejected [as well as] all forms of discrimination and domination, including ethnic and regional.”¹³ Complementing and reinforcing this national unity were the guidelines of broad-based popular participation; the human factor in development (individual dedication and self-sacrifice); self-reliance in all areas; a commitment to social and economic justice; and strong bonds between the leadership and population.

Virtually all of the policies developed and executed by PFDJ after its formation reflected some combination of these principles, with national unity a constant. From the redivision of the country into six zones or *zobas* [ዞጋ(s.), ዞጋታት(pl.)] that undermined existing homologies between ethnicity, region, kinship, and religion, and the restructuring of land tenure laws, to the development of mandatory National Service and the distribution or absorption of major economic assets, the new government carefully measured each step to adhere to these stated principles. And even as former fighters, young people, rural villagers, and Eritreans abroad all clamored for faster and greater strides to be made towards development and democratization almost from the get-go, the PFDJ insisted that all things would happen in due time and not a moment sooner.

Concerned that Eritrean society remained as yet too fragile, and that the powerful encroaching forces of international political-economy could stymie the nation-building process, the PFDJ sought to avoid becoming enmeshed in dynamics that would send Eritrea into the same post- and neo-colonial tailspin experienced by so many other

¹³ A National Charter for Eritrea: For A Democratic, Just and Prosperous Future (EPLF, February 1994); quoted in Pool 2001:164.

African countries. By 1996, PFDJ's response to the multiple pressures being exerted on it from within and without seemed to be a return to a more updated version of EPLF's approach during the struggle, which some powerful officials viewed as part of a larger trend sweeping Africa. Dan Connell (2001:368) quotes Zemhret Yohannes, a former ELF cadre who joined EPLF in 1981 and served on the front's political education committee, and later the PFDJ's five-person secretariat: "We are witnessing a new period, the beginning of a new stage. . . . There is a regeneration of the old national liberation agenda. . . . Now we are returning to our roots to create confident African states with genuinely national culture, regaining national pride. The basis for this is self-reliance -- breaking the vicious cycle of dependency that Africa has experienced over the past three decades." And while we can no longer be so sure what this new African agenda means given the continent's exceptionally troubled recent past and present, from Algeria to Zimbabwe, it seems more certain that Eritrea has remained on the course Zemhret describes, for better or worse, as we shall continue to see.

II.ii.iii. The Trans/National Body Politic

Just as the transformation from EPLF to PFDJ expressed continuity between the front and new party (which also continued to define itself as front, despite its reorganization), so too did the state's post-independence trans/national structure continue operating in much the same way as it had done during the struggle. However, some major augmentations to the state structure did begin taking place in the latter part of the post-independence decade in order to accommodate Eritrea's trans/national realities. One of these was the appointment of 15 officials to the National Assembly who represented different regional diasporas within the Eritrean government. Another was the issuing of the *menenet* [መነነት], an Eritrean national identity card that acts like a permanent visa and proof of citizenship for Eritreans living abroad. And perhaps most importantly, the state instituted an annual 2% flat tax levied on each adult Eritrean living abroad, whose

payment is coordinated and managed by the Embassies of Eritrea and local diaspora chapters of PFDJ. This steady stream of revenue combines with private remittances sent to family and friends, other kinds of financial donations, and the proceeds from government bonds sold during the Ethio-Eritrean border war, to comprise an estimated one-half or more of Eritrea's total gross national product (GNP) (see Bernal 2000b). Much of this financial flow -- overseas contributions totaled an estimated \$400 million in 2000 -- is managed and controlled by PFDJ.¹⁴

More recently, a new Division of Community Affairs within the Consular Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs formed in 1999 under the directorship of Semere Gebremariam, a former EPLF cadre with many years' experience living and organizing abroad, from Jerusalem to Germany. The Consular Section's central task is to help facilitate the transactions exiles conduct, often in only short visits home, including the buying and selling of property, the initiation of business transactions, and whatever inquiries people make about services they seek or would like to provide. The Community Affairs department, for its part, creates a bridge between Eritrean Embassies throughout the world and the Eritrean state, who work in tandem with PFDJ chapters to build and maintain community mobilization in their respective locations. In his bright and airy Asmara office, just a stone's throw from the NUEYS compound and kitty-corner to the Mufti's headquarters, Semere explained to me the purpose of the incipient department he took over but seven months earlier:

This office was created to really serve the offices of the community associations [abroad] and the Embassies, you know. We facilitate them in doing their business. . . . There is a division of Community Affairs, and a division of Consular Affairs, and our plan is. . . to give [diaspora Eritreans] very efficient services in terms of facilitating the things they do here. . . . And abroad, we have a plan towards raising communities, you know, they have

¹⁴ During the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean border war, US Eritreans contributed \$25 million in donations to the state. In Chicago, nearly \$1 million was raised in the course of several weeks, and another \$45,000 through a walkathon coordinated by the Eritrean Development Foundation (see section on NGOs, this chapter).

meetings and we go visit them, like we did before independence, and seek donations. And we have leaders, people who represent the communities and take care of the consular affairs. If we have consular affairs representatives there, then there must be a community affairs representative here, to take care of all the communities. That's what we're planning now, especially in the US and European countries. [The job of the community affairs representative would be] to organize communities, to help form communities [abroad]. For those already there, it would give them some projects to do, such as counting people, gathering data about who they are, monitoring the day to day conditions of our people.

These new departments and other augmentations made to the PFDJ's trans/national structure work to simultaneously help integrate diaspora Eritreans into local society and harness their economic potential, while also increasing direct contact between communities/individuals and the trans/national state structure itself.¹⁵ The ongoing role of *mahber koms*, or community associations, remains central to this endeavor, where the ideal leaders and representatives of the communities are also -- as Semere's comments imply -- affiliated with the government. However, as we observed in chapter four, many community associations abroad -- including Chicago's -- have resisted the one-party state's attempts to organize them. We will return to the further implications of the PFDJ - Embassy - community association triage for both Eritrea and exile in chapter six. We now turn towards the activities of PFDJ chapters abroad and in Chicago in particular.

Whether in Eritrea or exile, not everyone who belonged to EPLF automatically joined PFDJ upon its formation in 1994. Similarly, some who had been affiliated with ELF became members of the new party despite the obvious continuity between EPLF and PFDJ. Over the course of its major registration drive, which continued through 1995, more than 600,000 Eritrean men and women all over the world signed onto the party (Connell 2001:364). The structure of PFDJ membership included hundreds of local chapters throughout both Eritrea and its diaspora communities. While local Eritrean chapters initiated development projects such as road repair and reforestation in their immediate areas, all chapters "functioned as monthly forums to air local grievances and

¹⁵ See Tronvoll (1998b) for an analysis of this aspect of nation-building in Eritrea proper.

hear presentations on new government policies” (Connell 2001:364). In places like Chicago, the PFDJ sought to assume a major leadership role in the community, as well as provide important services to local residents and contribute financially to the specific projects being carried out by Eritrea-based PFDJ chapters. Most importantly, the Chicago PFDJ chapter, which carried about 50 names on its roster but revolved around an active and committed core of about 15 individuals -- almost exclusively men -- shouldered the very important task of building political consensus through the reproduction of proper national subjectivity among a wider, and often contumacious, population.

The chairman of the Chicago PFDJ chapter, a soft-spoken man who had been a rank and file fighter with EPLF, explained to me the role of PFDJ in the community as we sat together in the tiny, wedge-shaped office that has been perhaps the community’s longest consistent fixture, since its veteran days as the EPLF headquarters in the 1980s. In his capacities first as Secretary of the Chicago chapter, then as the regional Midwestern US representative to the PFDJ Congress of 1995 (known as the Nakfa Convention), and finally as the elected chairman of the chapter since 1998, this man was well-versed in the kinds of state services provided by local chapters of PFDJ:

Well, let’s first come to Eritrea. You see this big box here? [Points to large metal cabinet]. I will maybe open it one day for you and show you. This is the main place for our culture. It is full of videos, tapes, CDs, books, posters, old cards, everything. Mainly videos and cassettes from home. Songs, political messages, what is going on with the current crisis [border war], what was going on before, the annual Festivals [in Washington, DC]. The people come here -- and sometimes I put these things in my car, or my friends will also put them in their trunks, and wherever we find people we will sell it, during the festivals or during events, on Independence Day, New Years Eve, whatever, like if we do a festival on Martyr’s Day, June 20. We sell a lot. . . . So this has an economic benefit. Also, in distributing culture, keeping ties with people, so they feel a sense of -- so they do not feel culture shock, so they feel like they are at home even in America. It looks very small, but in all the cities it is very effective. . . . And it brings money, too. This year, with only the Northeast and Midwest [American zones], we sold 1.5 million dollars. And this went home to help fight [the border war]. . . . And then, we teach people also, [about] all the conflicts and current issues, what is going on, about the war, how we are winning it, what people [in Eritrea] need, like those who are dislocated because of the fighting, what new communities or hospitals or schools are being built, what they need. Or also sometimes selling or distributing *Haddas Ertra* [state-produced newspaper], or information from the Foreign Ministry [sic]. We do a lot of things. We also help with collecting materials, for

the relief work, or we help with the walkathons. And the 2% tax, the forms for the 2% tax, I do all the forms, or if somebody wants to do something, like buy a house [in Eritrea], I will do the letter, saying 'Mr. Blah-blah-blah will represent me at home,' and I send it to DC [the Embassy], and DC will send it to the individual, and I will say in a letter they have paid the 2% and are cooperating with all of us, and the Embassy will stamp it and send it, and that guy will send it home, to the person who represents him to build his house. So I help with that too.

Local PFDJ chapters like Chicago's are therefore important conduits for information and goods produced by the state, as well managers of the bureaucratic procedures required of and by citizens abroad. The main PFDJ representative in each community also becomes an important player, as individuals must conduct their business and communication with the state through that person. Both critics and supporters alike grouse that the system is an outdated holdover from the EPLF days, and that going through such designated officials creates problems if there is a conflict of personality, interest, or politics.¹⁶ As we have already seen, however, even more contested is the way in which the PFDJ has mandated the role of local chapters as leaders and organizers of community associations abroad. It is not difficult to see how many Eritreans who do not belong to PFDJ or oppose the party altogether feel overwhelmed by its presence in their everyday lives and spaces. Included among these are informal gathering places like coffee shops and diners, favorite hangouts for men of all stripes who like to debate politics and national identity.

The Golden House restaurant on Racine Avenue sits just across from the Broadway PFDJ office, but in some ways occupies a parallel universe. While PFDJ members gather every few weeks to hold heated discussions about government policy, listen to reports from those who have recently come from Eritrea, or pore over articles either sent via the Embassy or downloaded from the Internet, the unaffiliated and

¹⁶ Even those critical of the current government must play by its rules if they wish to do much of anything in Eritrea besides visit their families from time to time. Similarly, national commitments that supersede political identity compel virtually everyone to participate in fund-raising, especially when Eritrea is in turmoil, while bonds of kin and friendship encourage a constant flow of remittances. Hence the very high rates of revenue generated by exile communities despite the ambivalence many feel towards the current government.

unindoctrinated alike gather across the way, drinking coffee or tea and holding their own kind of court. A blend of anxiety and resolve pervades the PFDJ sessions. One of the recurrent topics is how to convincingly articulate the official PFDJ perspectives and defend current policy to the “tea-house talkers” who persist in critiquing the government and confusing their more impressionable compatriots. Indeed, one of the major difficulties PFDJ members seem to have with these informal political debates is the extent to which they operate according to “emotion” over “principle.” In their view, those who criticize the government and its policies do so not because they have honestly engaged with the issues, but because they continue to harbor ill-will left over from the days of the revolution, and/or they have been reading too many things over the Internet and have become even more ignorant as a result. PFDJ members, who also frequent the Golden House and places like it, must avert both errancy and troublemaking by teaching the true principles of PFDJ. Indeed, at a political education session held by PFDJ members during the dissemination of PFDJ’s pre-election statements on democracy and multipartyism, I was struck by the intensity with which those present collectively constructed and reinforced the government’s positions to one another, all the while anticipating the kinds of critiques others would level at them, and discussing effective ways to combat such emotional responses with deliberate, rational principles. As the guardian of the nation-state, PFDJ must also supervise the production and reproduction of national identity in diaspora, build political consensus, and lead communities towards more appropriate forms of organization and mobilization. The individuals who comprise PFDJ chapters are themselves agents of the state, and their belief in its benevolent omniscience is both genuine and besieged.¹⁷

¹⁷ Interestingly, the term for “principle” in Tigrinya is *metkel* [መትከል], which literally means “to plant.” The connotation is that EPLF’s revolutionary principles are organic, natural, vital; to violate the principles is to destroy their essence and rootedness in Eritrean culture and history.

For some, this belief in PFDJ reaches almost religious proportions. For others, however, religion has surpassed politics in its importance, in part because it provides an alternative construction of national and cultural identity that circumvents the tortured, tenacious distinctions between EPLF and ELF while providing relatively greater autonomy from the state. In the following section, I examine the form and content of religious bodies within the Eritrean trans/national social field.

II.iii. Religious Bodies: The Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Churches

Eritrea's religious composition remains evenly split between Christians and Muslims. However, as noted in chapter four, a combination of US refugee resettlement policy and self-selection pressures resulted in much larger numbers of highland Christians migrating to North America than Muslims. While Eritrean Muslims do indeed live in the United States and participate in the trans/national social field linking Eritrea and exile, very few can be found in the Chicagoland area. Moreover, if Eritrean Muslims in the US remain religiously observant, they have not yet formed independent mosques in the same way that Eritrean Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants have created congregations or churches

As Part I of this study demonstrated, religious identity has been implicated in Eritrean nationalism since the 1940s and '50s. During the early years of nationalist mobilization, pro-independence sentiment carried strong links to Islam, resulting in the lasting identification of ELF with competing secularist and Islamist constructions. Consequently, EPLF's emergence out of ELF entailed a definite religious dimension, as secular Christians and Muslims alike asserted the new front's commitment to detaching nationalism from religion altogether. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, EPLF actively "secularized" national identity to escape historic tensions between Islam and Christianity and to weaken the Ethiopian regime's attempts to foment religious discord. And while EPLF did not attempt to prevent Eritrean people from worshipping as they chose --

indeed, often relying upon churches and mosques as safe havens from Ethiopian violence and drawing inspiration from progressive statements made by Catholic Bishops against the Derg, for example -- the front did advocate a firm separation of religion and state that it continues to uphold in the post-independence period.

At the same time, however, EPLF has long opposed the presence of certain new religious movements in Eritrea, including Jehovah's Witnesses (who have suffered for their refusal to participate in the armed struggle and military service), Baha'is, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Evangelicals and Pentecostals. The most clear example can be found in the EPLF's *1977 National Democratic Programme*, where the front stated that while it would "safeguard every citizen's freedom of religion and belief," (Article 7A) it would also "strictly oppose all the imperialist-created new counter-revolutionary faiths, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal, Baha'i, etc." (Article 7D). It later softened this position in its 1987 Second Congress. However, religious institutions and identities in Eritrea today present a particularly potent challenge to the state's official, homogenizing construction of nationalism and its abilities to direct many aspects of social and civic life locally and trans/nationally.

While most of Eritrea's Christians are Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants comprise significant minorities. Catholicism arrived in Eritrea more than two hundred years prior to Italian colonialism, although it grew dramatically during the colonial period and became an important provider of educational and other social services. Protestantism, which arrived with Swedish Lutheran missionaries in the 1800s, has since witnessed a proliferation of denominations. Most important in recent years has been the explosive growth of charismatic Christian churches as Eritrea too has been swept up within this acknowledged global trend (Casanova 2001; Cox 1995; Martin 2002) which has won quite a few followers from the ranks of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and even Islam. The Eritrean Orthodox Church has also contended with the development of its own internal popular movement ("Orthopente") that incorporates modern, charismatic elements into

traditional Orthodox worship. Thus, despite the secular orientation of nationalism and of EPLF/PFDJ in general, religious belief and practice remains extremely important in the lives of many Eritreans.

Among Eritreans in the US, religion and religious institution-building has become especially salient in exile, for reasons related to migration and resettlement as well as the particular dynamics of community organizing within the trans/national social field. This is not at all unusual; many studies have indicated the tendency for immigrant groups in the US to become more religiously active in diaspora than perhaps they were at home. This stems from a response to both American cultural values and other structural forces that both encourage religiosity among immigrants and enable effective religious institution-building, as well immigrants' own quests to preserve the linguistic and cultural patterns that define them as a group (Casanova and Zolberg 2002; Casanova 2002; Herberg 1960; Kurien 2001; Warner and Wittner 1998; Williams 1988). More recently, however, researchers have begun paying attention to the role of religious bodies and identities within existing transnational social fields (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Hepner 2003b; Kurien 2001; Levitt 2001). Among Chicago Eritreans, both dimensions have emerged as significant in recent years: not only have Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal congregations recently become the most active and successful community institutions to date, but they also connect people back to church bodies and religious identities in Eritrea, with implications for the state's own trans/national structure and approach to nation-building.¹⁸

Once enmeshed within the daily life of the Chicago Eritrean community, I was somewhat surprised to discover the centrality and frequency of religious gatherings. Indeed, I found myself in church almost every Sunday, sometimes three times. Although small, young, and resource poor, the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Pentecostal

¹⁸ This section is largely culled from my essay, "Religion, Nationalism, and Transnational Civil Society in the Eritrean Diaspora," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 10:3 (2003).

Eritrean congregations in Chicago seemed to show higher levels of activity, commitment, cooperation, and responsiveness to community needs than any other organization in the community's past or present. In some ways, the institutions based upon religious identity and practice mitigate against tensions related to political identity that are so palpable within organizations based on secular nationalism. Moreover, the relative religious homogeneity of the community cross-cut against other kinds of identities, such as ethno-regional, gender, or generation, fostering a greater sense of unity and mobilizing many more people than the community association, PFDJ, or NUEW had been able to do. Whether attending Orthodox, Catholic, or Pentecostal worship, I observed cooperation and fellowship among people who had struggled for many years to create the same effects in other kinds of forums. Similarly, the churches also provided a consistent location for the provision of services that other community institutions had not been able to provide; in particular, children were learning Tigrinya skills through Bible study and worship, connections were being made with American institutions and communities, support for important life events like weddings, baptisms, and funerals could easily be mounted, and perhaps most importantly, people came together as large groups on a weekly basis, providing opportunities to address other social issues relevant to the community.

Relatively speaking, inter-denominational Christianity remains the most de-politicized sphere of Eritrean collective social life. It is also a powerful purveyor of culture, language, and ideas about morality and unity that supersede profane and contested notions deployed through secular nationalist demands. Eritrean Orthodoxy and Catholicism in particular, although Pentecostalism too, remain uniquely embedded in traditional cultural and linguistic patterns, allowing congregants to experience and reproduce Eritrean identity in a sublimely different manner than secular nationalist organizing. Religious settings therefore provide a way for people to practice Eritreanness beyond its tortured politicization and offer a different organizing principle for the community.

In some important ways, this appears to be more related to American realities than Eritrean ones. As Rhys Williams (2003, pers. comm.) suggests, the depoliticization or compartmentalization of religious identity in American society, justified in terms of pluralism and the separation of Church and State, establishes conditions for religion to function as a principle of collective action beyond the realm of politics and political mobilization. In this way, the salience of religion for Eritrean community-building is at least partially a response to American socio-cultural and political realities. However, this separation also pertains to the Eritrean state, which (until more recently) provided the Orthodox, Catholic, and at least some Protestant churches with much more autonomy than virtually any other sphere of Eritrean public life. As a result, the churches like those in Chicago occupy a unique place within the trans/national social field, one that has not been thoroughly penetrated or regulated by the one-party state.¹⁹

II.iii.i Trans/National Religious Identities and Institutions

In large part, it is the structural internationalism and ecumenism of modern church bodies and doctrine that contribute to their depoliticization in diaspora and challenge the Eritrean state's trans/national administrative power. And while definite similarities obtain between the ways in which different church bodies have engaged trans/nationally with their diaspora congregations, crucial differences also exist based upon the overall structures of Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestant Pentecostalism.

In keeping with its historic transnational orientation (Casanova 2001: Della Cava 2001), the Eritrean Catholic Church is connected through the Vatican to a worldwide network of dioceses and parishes, rendering it less amenable to the circumscribed

¹⁹ Religious bodies have not been impervious to the state, however, as we shall see later in this chapter. Recently, the Eritrean government banned worship at "new churches" such as Pentecostal, Jehovah's Witnesses, 7th Day Adventist, etc. It also silenced the Catholic Church and banned its 2001 Pastoral Letter for its critical position on certain aspects of social and political development since independence. Compared to all other civil institutions, however, churches are the most popular and powerful in their own right.

nationalist projects of particular states. Accordingly, the Catholic Church's spiritual mandate conflicts with the jurisdiction of nation-building, and especially the Eritrean government's rigorous opposition to any religiously-affiliated social development projects, as one priest in Eritrea explained to me:

The Church's stand is very, very universal, all embracing. And the Church's mission is not always very well understood by some states. We were misunderstood very much in this state of Eritrea. The area of education for example, the area of health and development - there are areas where the church, by its own mission, has to involve itself. To care for the sick? It has been since the time of Jesus, and will always be the Church's mission. To say the church will not be involved in this will never work.

Similarly, Eritrean Pentecostalism is a relatively new incarnation of traditions initiated in the mid-1800s by the Swedish Evangelical Mission and is distinctly modern, eclectic, and international in its outlook. While each Eritrean Pentecostal church remains autonomous and does not claim any overarching administrative body, evangelicalism links born-again Christians together through both informal networks and an all-encompassing discourse of salvation through Jesus Christ. Incorporating modern music, technology, and a steady stream of international visitors from other evangelical groups throughout the world, Eritrean Pentecostalism retains distinctive elements of language and culture but clearly rejects the perceived traditionalism and parochialism of Orthodoxy and Catholicism. It is what Casanova (2001) refers to as a "local manifestation of global culture."

As an autonomous institution, the *Mulu Wangeel Biet Kristyan Asmara*, or Full Gospel Church of Asmara, maintains linkages with the Finnish Pentecostal Church and the Assemblies of God, and, more recently, other Eritrean Pentecostal congregations in the US, including the Maranatha Christian Fellowship in Chicago. During services in its two Asmara locations, several thousand people gathered several times a week beneath enormous yellow and white tents. Guests from all over the world -- Canada, the US, and Kenya during my visits -- preached and testified in several different languages, drawing Eritrean worshippers into a religious community that defies national borders and

identities. In Chicago, the Maranatha Fellowship is the only Eritrean church to have several non-Eritrean (African-American) members. It also holds occasional social events with the mostly white, Missouri Synod Lutheran congregation that sponsors it. The congregants embrace and practice Eritrean culture through worship but reject narrow nationalism, leading some Eritreans, and the PFDJ itself, to regard Pentecostals as insufficiently Eritrean.

The Orthodox Church is, in many ways, still the official Eritrean national church and displays less internationalism than any of the other denominations. This is true of Orthodoxy in general, as Della Cava (2001:537) points out through the case of the Russian Orthodox Church. Compared to Catholicism, Orthodoxy cannot easily be characterized as transnational. Consisting of fifteen independent national churches, each possesses its own Patriarch and has full autonomy in administrative and pastoral matters (Della Cava 2001:537). In Eritrea, Orthodox Christians are a numerical majority, rivaled only by Muslims. As an institution, however, the Eritrean Orthodox Church is just beginning to work out a transnational structure that incorporates diaspora congregations. Currently, the mother church in Asmara recognizes fourteen congregations in the US. All churches communicate with Asmara through the Diocese of the USA and Canada, in Atlanta, Georgia.

Many more than fourteen Eritrean Orthodox congregations exist in the US, however, frequently forming around a priest or priests who arrived by other means. The church disapproves of “unofficial” congregations in exile and mandates that each Orthodox priest accept in full the mother Church’s written doctrine as well as its structural authority. The Church resists recognizing unofficial diaspora congregations, preferring to send its own selected priests (of which it faces a shortage, thus contributing to the proliferation of unofficial congregations). Part of the Church’s attempts to control diaspora congregations appears related to the repression of the “Orthopente” movement that adopts charismatic or “foreign” elements into Orthodox liturgy. The Church fears the

proliferation of such reformist congregations in diaspora and seeks to stem them through a weak but developing transnational structure. In this way it resembles the Eritrean state in its attempts to dominate diaspora activities; not surprising given the Orthodox Church's historic status as the official state religion in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

For its part, the Eritrean state itself can do little or nothing to control the growth of religious communities abroad. Not only do religious bodies by their very nature subvert national and state-juridical boundaries, but their rather weak transnational links to specific diaspora congregations help insulate the latter from intervention by the Eritrean state. Further sanctioned by American patterns of religious freedom and Church-State separation, Eritreans have found it structurally easier to form congregations in the US than any other type of institution. The invigoration of religion as a semi-private sphere with decidedly public potentials encourages the development of ties to churches in Eritrea itself, which clearly have made new accommodations for the diaspora as well. To a large extent, these accommodations entail a growing awareness among clergy of the particular spiritual concerns and services needed by Eritreans living abroad. Both the Catholic and Orthodox churches recognize the great demand for priests in diaspora congregations and struggle to meet the intensified demands for certain rituals such as weddings and baptisms that overwhelm them during the *beles* season. Similarly, Protestant Pentecostals work hard to continue their international communications and fellowship with non-Eritreans who share their faith despite the fact that the government disapproves of their beliefs, practices, and internationalist orientation.

The content of religious belief also provides solace for the conflicts over national and political identity plaguing Eritrean communities in diaspora, and its practice offers an alternative cultural configuration not beholden to political definitions, even as they remain referents. Moral messages conveyed through song, sermon, and prayer frequently speak to the political problems faced by the community and Eritrea as a whole. For example, in a homily delivered by the Orthodox priest one Sunday, the story of Jacob and

Esau paralleled the drama of Eritrea's rival political fronts. As the "younger sibling" of the ELF, the EPLF managed to defeat its older brother and inherit the independent state. The mistrust and jealousies born of this defeat continue to threaten the national "family," as the priest implicitly reminded the congregants. At another Orthodox holiday in honor of the Virgin Mary, young women sang a song comparing the bondage of Satan to colonialism. Similarly, religious themes embedded in a distinctly Eritrean context, such as the use of military metaphors in Pentecostalism, or Catholic messages about reconciliation, forgiveness, and healing, all carry special cultural and historical weight for Eritreans. As one Catholic priest visiting from Eritrea said at Sunday mass: "Christ came from heaven to bring peace. We must have peace in our lives, our communities, in our associations, in our homes, and with our neighbors. Peace is our responsibility to our nation." Thus far unable to work out in secular contexts their grievances and the deep emotive pain caused by war, betrayal, and exile, many Eritreans are turning to religion instead.

Some interdenominational tensions do exist between congregations in diaspora, but these largely have to do with the ambivalence Orthodox and Catholics feel towards Pentecostalism. Not only do Pentecostals evangelize among the other two groups, but as noted earlier, they also decline participation in other aspects of immigrant Eritrean collective life and identity. More than any other religious group, Pentecostals reject the narrow, exclusionary face of nationalism. They also avoid social behaviors other Eritreans enjoy in abundance. While Pentecostals do not refuse to fight in wars or fund-raise for the state, they do shun cultural dancing, drinking, smoking, and, above all, "the politics." The Orthodox and Catholics, as well as those who do not profess any religion, view the Pentecostals as prudes with unclear intentions. In some ways, their religious identity has become too primary over national identity. One elderly Pentecostal woman explained the reasons why she is not involved in secular community activities in terms of her faith:

We don't want to be separate [from one another]. If you believe in one God, why are you separate? I don't believe in that. It's not Christian. This is politics. I'm scared to go there [to the community association meetings] because they have so much separation. Mostly I just have to live my life. Why should we go all the way back there [to past experiences], back home, saying 'you can't say this or that,' or 'you killed my family'? Maybe that's the reason I don't go, I don't know. But thanks to God, when we go to church, we don't think about politics.

Another woman, a pro-EPLF activist from the 1970s group EFLNA, who later faced hostility from newly-arrived ELF refugees when she tried to help them, described how church provided a niche that the bitter politics of the community could not:

Then it came to me - even in the beginning, I was more of a church person. There are so many things you can solve through church, so many services you can get there. Now, people can find me if they want me. If I work so hard and I am not appreciated, then it's not helping anybody. I stopped going there [to the community association meetings]. I joined this church and here I am now.

But no one expressed it as powerfully as a Protestant pastor in Eritrea, who also helped found a Pentecostal congregation in the US many years ago as a student. Speaking about the role of religion in the wake of Eritrea's long war, he carefully traced out the tension between religion and nationalist politics:

In the past, everything had to be put into this national struggle. Minds, lives, limbs. . . . But it cannot be about nationalism forever. You have to think about deeper issues in life. You think about life after death, and is there a God. . . . Both [religion and nationalism] are very powerful, and they can be used to mislead people. You cannot be without them. Religion is for here and the life hereafter. Politics is for here, but there are very important issues not part of its dogma. Since politics is everywhere, many people, especially in Eritrea, think nationalism can be a like a god, with a small 'g.' Unfortunately, both can be abused, even religion, if the leaders are corrupt. . . . Politics is the same. It's more shameful when it happens in religion. But politics? Politics is one of those things.

It seems Eritreans have recently begun realizing that politics is indeed "one of those things" as they witness the growth and success of depoliticized, religious institutions both at home and abroad. Indeed, many have turned a hopeful face towards religion in order to explore its potential for greater autonomy and more genuine unity, albeit to the state's consternation. We will return to the implications of trans/nationalizing

religious bodies and identities for Eritrea and its exile communities in the latter sections of this chapter.

II.iv.i. NGOs or GONGOs? Self-Reliance and Reliance on the State

Eritrea's troubled relationship with non-governmental organizations, both indigenous and foreign-based, has earned the Eritrean government a dubious blend of respect and disdain among many different sectors of the development community. On one level, the notion of a small, new, and poor African country going chest to chest with forces ranging from structural adjustment programs to mission Christianity in order to protect its own interests has inspired a great many observers. On another level, the Eritrean state's insistence on maintaining control over all foreign funding and development projects according to its own specific terms has alienated actual and potential development organizations, donors, and private investors.

Beginning with a controversial 1994 decision to restrict all NGO presence in Eritrea, the PFDJ embarked on a series of measures aimed at preventing development work from becoming an agent of foreign influence and change. In particular, the government did not want NGOs whose work might inadvertently contribute to class, ethno-regional, or religious inequalities to develop firm roots in Eritrea, nor did it want the country to become a testing ground for economic plans that fit poorly with either the local conditions or the PFDJ's own policies. In contrast, PFDJ continued to create policies that enhanced "self-reliance," the pragmatic approach to human-centered resource development practiced during the revolution. The nemesis of self-reliance, the government asserted, was dependency on foreign aid, organizations, governments, or concepts. Firmly maintaining that the Eritrean government knew what was best for the Eritrean people, PFDJ insisted in no uncertain terms that it retain ultimate authority over all foreign and indigenous NGOs.

Thus, in 1994, the government announced a series of determinations about NGO

operation in Eritrea. Foremost among them were the following: that no religious institutions may carry out relief and development work if they also included an evangelization or mission component; that all international aid agencies must report on their operations and finances; that agencies unable to operate their Eritrea-based offices on ten percent or less of their funds must leave the country; that foreign NGO workers must pay taxes to the Eritrean government; and all foreign funding for indigenous organizations like NUEW or NUEYS would be limited and subject to the government's continuing approval (see Connell 2001:355). In the years following, these restrictions became even more intense (Killion 1998:207), including the stipulation that foreign NGOs could not design, fund, or implement any projects of their own. Rather, upon the government's approval, they could work in partnership with a local community and/or government ministry on a project tailored to fit Eritrea's needs. Indeed, as the government noted in a 1996 briefing session in Asmara,

One of the primary pitfalls the Government must avoid is the problem of structural dependency that may be nurtured through permanent or self-perpetuating external assistance. . . . If the external assistance sought is not purposeful, focused, time-bound, and above all, structurally linked to the long-term development agenda of the country concerned, however, there is a strong likelihood that the recipient country will remain hopelessly enmeshed in dependency syndrome -- invariably relying on international handouts to mitigate all and every development challenges that it encounters. Such a negative and dangerous trend will not only entail a permanent burden on those doling out aid but, more harmfully, dampen the resourcefulness and creativity of the recipient community. As such it represents a serious distortion of the very rationale and purpose of external aid.²⁰

While many foreign organizations supported Eritrea's insistence on self-reliance and respected the government's decisions, others presented very cold shoulders as they packed up and left the country for good. Some scoffed at the government's seemingly unrealistic policies, citing the harsh reality of Eritrea's chronic food insecurity and the fact that those dependent upon foreign food aid maintained at about 80 percent even in

²⁰ "Role, Scope, and Modalities of Operation of International NGOs in Eritrea." ERREC, Asmara, February 25, 1996.

relatively good harvest years. These issues later came back to haunt Eritrea as these organizations and others refused to provide help or relief funds at later times of crisis, such as during the Ethio-Eritrean border war.²¹

Eritrea's post-independence orientation towards NGOs emerged out of EPLF's long history of providing effective relief and development work through the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), a Khartoum-based NGO formed by the liberation fronts and the eminent lawyer Bereket Habte-Selassie in 1975 to help victims of drought, famine, and displacement in the areas liberated by ELF and EPLF. Conflicts between the fronts, however, resulted in ERA's primary linkage with EPLF, while ELF created its own Eritrean Red Cross and Crescent Society (ERCCS) (Killion 1998:305). Neither organization was able to create significant partnerships with foreign NGOs, however, due to both competing claims between ERA and ERCCS and the negative image of the Eritrean rebels cultivated by the Ethiopian regime. Because Eritrea remained part of Ethiopia until 1991, most relief aid for drought and famine victims had been directed to the Ethiopian Derg regime, which withheld the aid from the northern Eritrean and Tigrayan regions as a weapon against rebellion (Keller 1992; Sorenson 1993).

In the latter 1970s and early 1980s, however, ERA formed chapters throughout exile communities worldwide under the name the Eritrean Relief Committee (ERC), and it was through the work of Eritreans living abroad that major partnerships began developing with foreign NGOs (see also Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001). By 1983, 120 international agencies were cooperating with ERA due to the mobilization efforts of exile activists, among them the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and the World Council of Churches (WCC) (Killion 1998:205). Most of the work concentrated on getting food aid across the Sudanese border

²¹ See Isayas Afwerki's presentation to the International Development Conference, January 16, 1995, Washington, DC, "Achieving Global Human Security: Eritrea's View," for a more thorough summary of the PFDJ position on NGOs.

and into areas liberated by EPLF or refugee camps set up by the front for the displaced. Gradually, the scale of ERA's operations in Eritrea increased as more and more donors signed on to assist "the most efficient aid operation in Africa" (Sorenson 1993:117, following Brodhead 1986:876). Within exile communities, moreover, participating in relief activities and fundraising represented an area of community life where EPLF supporters, former ELF members, and nonaffiliates could work together and achieve tangible results. In many ways, the EPLF, through ERA/ERC, extended the notion of self-reliance in the field to include the national selves who lived beyond the country's borders, drawing upon their abilities to connect with important agencies and governments in their respective locations for the benefit of Eritrea. This pattern is similar to that of post-independence Unions, as we have already seen.

After independence, in 1992, ERA was transformed into ERRA (Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Agency), and "was mandated to coordinate all NGO relief and rehabilitation activities in the country with the overall plans of the Eritrean government" (Killion 1998:207). Several years later, as the government began curtailing the presence and activities of foreign NGOs while also initiating major refugee repatriation efforts from Sudan, it merged ERRA with the Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs (Ibid.). Meanwhile, in exile communities, chapters of ERC more or less suspended their efforts under the same conditions experienced by the mass organizations around the time of independence as EPLF underwent the transition from front to government. Given the fact that it inherited a country and infrastructure literally leveled to the ground, however, the ongoing necessity of exile assistance -- both through direct economic support as well as through the kinds of relief assistance secured in the past -- seemed clear. As Connell (2001:344) powerfully describes,

Overnight, the new government had to design everything from passports, drivers licenses, and postage stamps to telecommunication systems, school curricula, and an investment policy, while also addressing massive housing and food shortages and reviving the battered economy. In effect,. they had to create a country from scratch. Water and sewer

systems in Asmara and other cities and towns barely worked, the few paved roads were mostly torn up, the rail system was unusable, electricity was available in most towns only four-to-five hours a day, fields and orchards were overgrown with weeds, the hillsides around the towns were laced with land mines, and most of the country's forest cover was gone.

II.iv.ii. Indigenous NGOs and Trans/National Development

Considering the magnitude and complexity of the post-independence situation in Eritrea, securing the participation of Eritreans living in exile thus became even more important following independence than prior to it. In this regard, PFDJ drew on the existing trans/national social field for development and reconstruction-related support, although now with the power of a state that could levy taxes and request other kinds of contributions in exchange for citizenship rights and national belonging. These sources of revenue proved very important during the transitional phase, when former mass organizations began transforming themselves into ostensibly autonomous NGOs and the former Eritrean Relief Association shouldered the massive task of both restricting and coordinating foreign NGO assistance while developing its own programs and strategies. For much of the decade following independence, then, Eritrea's new infrastructures were in flux to such a degree that many exile organizations, chapters of ERC included, remained on hold until further notice.

Beginning in 1998, however, around the time of renewed war with Ethiopia, indigenous Eritrean NGOs once again began appearing in exile and seeking partnerships with the Eritrean government. The largest and most well-known of these has been the Eritrean Development Foundation (EDF), a Washington, DC and Asmara-based operation that arose from the ashes of the former US branch of the ERC.

Similar to the way in which ERC chapters operated in relationship to ERA in Sudan and Eritrea, the Eritrean Development Foundation's primary mandate remains the mobilization of Eritreans in the US to build awareness and garner resources among existing American institutions or communities in order to assist with Eritrean

development projects. Thus, local EDF chapters around the United States organize various events, including annual walkathons in June, for which they secure sponsorship from American individuals and groups. The funds raised by these and other activities carried out by EDF members are then sent via Washington, DC to Eritrea, where the Asmara-based office of EDF works with local bodies like NUEYS or the government itself to help fund the projects already designed. In this way, EDF represents more of a supportive force than anything else; it neither plans nor implements any development projects in Eritrea but rather supplies funds, resources, and sometimes additional ideas for those developed by existing Eritrean institutions or the government.

Over lunch one afternoon in an upscale Asmara restaurant, I interviewed Nuhad Jamal, a Palestinian-American who was the Washington, DC-based executive director of EDF at the time. She described to me how EDF as both an American and Eritrean NGO “embodied the schizophrenia of the Eritrean-American condition.” Bound at once to the policies of the Eritrean government, EDF chapters try to work effectively with local American civic institutions to harness resources for Eritrea-specific causes and projects. Well-aware of the Eritrean government’s suspicion of foreign influences and funding, EDF mobilizes exile communities to become bridges between local Eritrean society, whose needs are represented and managed by PFDJ, and the kinds of donor organizations that would like to fund projects in Eritrea but cannot (or will not) navigate the Eritrean government’s policies. Almost all of EDF’s funding comes from American sources, Nuhad told me, with Eritrean activists doing the work to secure it. By their second year in operation, EDF had raised \$750,000 and had sent \$1.8 million in medicines and medical supplies to the Ministry of Health in Asmara. EDF also accepts donations from Eritrean community groups not necessarily affiliated with EDF; for example, Eritrean communities throughout the US helped donate brand-new books valued at \$200,000,

which EDF shipped to Eritrea in January 2002 to its in-country partner, the Library Association of Eritrea.²² Similarly, in Chicago, the Eritrean Pentecostal congregation collected cash donations among its members during the border war, which it turned over entirely to EDF. One of EDF's other most important liaisons has been NUEYS, for whom it has provided funding for five separate projects, including a campaign against female genital cutting and an academic tutoring program for girls. Moreover, EDF remains in dialogue with NUEYS about the latter's plans to start a summer camp for diaspora youth that will help re-enculturate them within local Eritrean society.

One of EDF's other important functions, Nuhad explained to me, has also been increasing the professional standardization and social dimensions of doing development work, especially where the government of Eritrea is concerned. Prior to EDF's formation, Eritreans and others involved in post-independence development work often voiced frustration that the government-run ERRA provided neither accounting of funds nor indications of gratitude for donations. EDF's familiarity with practices commonly employed within western development communities enabled them to act as mediators between the government and donors to provide the appropriate accountability and modes of social interaction. In this way, EDF also ameliorates cultural tensions that arise between Eritrean and American practices and communication patterns while subtly showing the Eritrean government how to improve relations with actual or potential donors.

EDF is not the only indigenous, trans/national NGO enabling the participation of exiles in local Eritrean society. Several other organizations have also been initiated with the explicit goals of increasing the Eritrean state's capacity to absorb skilled exiles and putting them to work in ways that serve, rather than offend, the government's very specific procedures and needs. One such NGO, Haben, grew out of a 1991 effort among

²² "EDF Sends Books to Eritrea," Press release, Washington, DC, January 2, 2002.

intellectuals in Eritrea and exile to begin addressing the post-independence role and reintegration of skilled exiles. Most of those involved in the discussion belonged to the Research and Information Center on Eritrea (RICE), another EPLF affiliate geared towards academic study and research on all aspects of Eritrean economy, ecology, culture, history, and politics.²³ With so many transitions occurring in Eritrea after independence, however, the discussion fell by the wayside. Founded in 2000 by Dr. Berhane Woldemichael, a former RICE participant and longtime supporter of EPLF in the UK, Haben therefore aimed to rekindle the “tremendous enthusiasm” among skilled exiles to return to Eritrea while also facilitating the terms and conditions of their re-entry.

With the renewal of war with Ethiopia in 1998, Eritrea’s existing development and relief needs increased exponentially. However, the restrictions imposed by PFDJ on foreign NGOs had left many groups in the UK, where Berhane lived and had earned a Ph.D. in development studies, unwilling to assist. Berhane decided to return to Eritrea permanently and form his own indigenous NGO. After beginning the process of securing government approval, which took well over a year, Haben began operating in August 2000 with funding from International Church Aid and Norwegian Church Aid. Almost one year later I visited Berhane there to interview him about the organization, and later conducted informal interviews with two Eritrean volunteers who had returned from the US under Haben’s auspices.

Similar to Project Eritrea 2001, initiated by a Chicago resident through an affiliation with NUEYS, Haben recruits skilled Eritreans from the diaspora to work a minimum of six months at posts within government ministries and other institutions in Eritrea. Advertising on Eritrean Internet websites and through word of mouth, Haben accepts curriculum vitae from interested Eritreans (and a few select non-Eritreans) and

²³ RICE had a distinctively trans/national presence as well, with offices in Italy, England, the US, and liberated Eritrea. After independence, RICE’s archival division became the Research and Documentation Center (RDC) in Asmara, while the international community of scholars working on Eritrean issues became the Eritrean Studies Association (ESA).

works to place them in the various posts. With funding from the Dutch Embassy, Haben provides for their recruits an attractive salary and benefits package well above and beyond anything a local Eritrean could imagine, as well as a one-week orientation program to acclimate them to life in Eritrea.²⁴ During the time I conducted fieldwork, seven individuals had been assigned to posts in agriculture, psychological counseling, information technology, and hydrological engineering. Undoubtedly, however, the deteriorating conditions within Eritrea during the border war and the subsequent intensification of the government's control over many aspects of life discouraged many people who would otherwise have responded to Haben's call. Nonetheless, both Haben and EDF represent important channels through which Eritreans in exile continue to provide material and human resources to Eritrea's nation-building project. They also assist in helping build both the government's capacity to absorb such resources and constructing a culture of professionalism around indigenous development work that complies with the government's rigorous demands.

At the same time, however, the level of necessary attachment between the state and these NGOs throws their putative autonomy into question. As in the case of the Unions, we must ask whether institutions like Haben and EDF are truly NGOs, or if they more closely resemble GONGOs, government-organized NGOs. Moreover, the rapid turnover of so many NGOs in Eritrea, both those formed locally and in exile, calls into question the degree to which NGOs are actually truly welcome in Eritrea. While we will address this issue more fully in the next section, I conclude here with the words of one Chicago resident who once sought to become involved with trans/national NGO work,

²⁴ While the salaries of Haben recruits are astronomical by local standards, those involved in such exile recruitment work remain acutely aware of the dilemmas faced by both Eritrea and exile. On the one hand, Eritrea needs the expertise and skills of exiles, whose participation -- unlike that of foreign aid workers -- does not violate the nationalist ethic of self-reliance. On the other hand, most exiles are accustomed to relatively high standards of living, can compete for jobs with native-born citizens of their countries of settlement, and usually possess multiple financial obligations that must continue to be met while they work in Eritrea. National commitment alone cannot reverse the brain drain of forced migration, so organizations like Haben must offer attractive and reasonably competitive packages.

but decided that assisting his friends and family through informal remittances would lead to greater changes in their lives and well-being:

It's all an extension of the government, as far as I'm concerned. I know [NGOs] mean well, to help the refugees and the displaced or whatever, but when it comes to development issues they are not challenging the government to be independent and to do the development themselves.

II.v. Networks of Kin and Friendship

Irrespective of all other trans/national institutions, linkages, or identities Eritreans around the world may participate in, each and every individual remains bound to multiple others through affective ties of kin and friendship. The massive scale of outmigration from Eritrea beginning in the 1960s scattered over one-quarter of the country's total population around the world. Just as Eritreans frequently note that each and every person lost at least one family member during the thirty-year war of independence, so too, they say, does every Eritrean at home have at least one family member living abroad.

Kinship among Eritrean Christian highlanders in particular is generally traced through agnatic (male), segmentary lineages, or *gezawuti* [ገጃዉቲ], which form the traditional basis for residence and claims to land in particular villages (Tronvoll 1998a:99). Most Eritreans, including those whose families may have long since left the village and migrated to the city, can generally trace their descent approximately seven generations back. Similarly, the segmentary system engenders a proliferation of patrilineages that all trace descent to a single male agnate many generations prior (Nadel 1946; Tronvoll 1998a). While Eritrean highland kinship structure is an extremely complex subject I make no attempt to address in any detail here, the significance of these relationships among modern urban dwellers nonetheless seems to be twofold. First, every individual knows which village or region his or her family originally comes from and is known by others according to that line; and secondly, individuals tend recognize even distant and diffuse kin connections between them.

As Tronvoll has noted (1998a; 1998b), the EPLF-led revolution altered important aspects of traditional kinship structure in the highlands to reorient the tenacious loyalties people felt for their region, village, land, and relatives towards the nation as a whole. More generally, as I have pointed out in chapter two, the nature of the independence struggle and its enormous sacrifices also impacted upon the sense of belonging and solidarity traditionally sustained by kinship, drawing upon its metaphorical power to recreate blood-links between people as members of liberation fronts and as Eritreans (see also Bernal 2000b). The reconfiguration of kinship bonds vis-à-vis both political identity and nationalism has generated powerful fictive kin ties between non-related individuals, who frequently refer to one another by terms like brother, sister, mother, father, or cousin when no biological relationship exists. Thus, the ways in which kinship ties operate as trans/national linkages between Eritrea and exile is not necessarily limited to actual biological relatives but often includes friends, former comrades, and fictive kin.

With the exception of the Internet, addressed in the next section, the resources and ideas exchanged between relatives and friends trans/nationally are the least subject to intervention and regulation by the state. Despite the fact that the nationalist revolution sought to replace primary loyalties of family with that of citizen and state, most Eritreans living in exile continue to view their responsibilities and obligations largely in terms of their families and closest friends (see Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001). During the most radical period of the revolution in the late 1970s, it was common for Eritreans in the US to shun sending money or goods directly to their families. Rather, they sent everything to EPLF, believing that supporting the front also meant supporting one's family, inasmuch as their continuing safety and well-being was entrusted to EPLF. Today, however, Eritreans living abroad pay taxes to the state but also send money and other kinds of material items to their families. Unlike the earlier climate among unequivocal EPLF supporters, many do not believe that the state has the capacity or desire to provide

services and economic sustenance to its citizens, and therefore have taken it upon themselves to support their loved ones. We will return to this point later.

Private remittances sent by Eritreans abroad to their relatives and friends at home are not monitored or controlled by the state, nor do they travel through official avenues such as banks or wire transfer services as in so many other countries with highly developed remittance practices.²⁵ Rather, most Eritreans rely upon the constant stream of people coming and going to physically carry and distribute cash to those for whom it is intended. It is not unusual for someone to travel with upwards of ten thousand dollars on his or her person, destined for perhaps dozens of families.²⁶ Indeed, private remittances remain a central part of the Eritrean economy (Bernal 2000b). They also frequently mean the distinction between poverty and sustenance for many people, as well as new differences between Eritreans based upon who has help from abroad and who does not -- a difference one man in Eritrea described as being "like sky and earth." Thus, remittances contribute to new class divisions and status markers in Eritrea, as even relatively well-off families have come to expect their relatives abroad -- many of whom do not enjoy the same relative standard of living in the US -- to send money or western items like clothing, appliances, videos, music, and other scarce commodities. This creates dilemmas for both local Eritreans and those living abroad. One woman, a former resident of the US and now a government official, felt distressed by what she saw as rampant consumerism developing in Eritrea. Consistent with Eritrea's fierce, do-it-yourself ethic, she explained how turning down remittances was an act of both pride and conscious resistance:

²⁵ The government does levy the usual customs taxes on goods like electronics and appliances, however, either carried into the country by airplane or shipped by mail.

²⁶ I myself carried large sums of money and some material items such as clothing, shoes, toiletries, etc. from Chicago to Eritrea, which I then distributed according to the instructions I had been given, sometimes traveling long distances to do so. In fact, participating in such exchanges allowed me to understand how the process works between Eritreans and became part of my methodology. Delivering money or items to family members allowed me to establish trust with people and enabled later discussions or interviews about their transnational relationships with their relatives in Chicago.

Here, I try to survive with what I need. Like most of my other extended relatives here, they sometimes tell me, 'Why don't you buy a big house? You have [relatives] in the US who will help you!' But I say no, I have to be able to survive with whatever I make. They have their own life and I have my own life. Sometimes they might send me some clothes or other small items. And I also send them things -- they don't like it, but I send them like gold [jewelry] or something for my nieces. I like to do it, I want to do it. And I also want to make them feel that I can also send things, not just them. And there is also the other way around -- sometimes I have fights [with family members here] -- I tell them they are like beggars, sophisticated beggars. I can see it if people send money to needy ones. But it's becoming a culture here, you know, to get money from people in diaspora.

Not everyone shares this woman's critical consciousness, however. Many people indeed seem keen to exploit the sense of responsibility felt by Eritreans abroad to help out their loved ones at home. Moreover, the constant comings and goings of exiles have introduced local society to the cultural tastes, styles, and consumerism of western societies and the United States especially. As a result, the existing gap between more well-off families and those who get by on less continues to widen, while the few families who cannot rely on help from abroad sink ever deeper towards the bottom of Eritrea's evolving class structure. Nonetheless, many Eritreans who live in the US feel that it is the very least they can do to help out family members at home, and still others would prefer to live on little in the US for the peace of mind that their loved ones in Eritrea are doing well. They also enjoy a sense of status and value when they return home (see Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001:592; see also Basch et al 1994; Glick-Schiller and Fouron 1999, 2001; Levitt 2001). A Chicago taxicab driver explained the commitment so many people feel and how he himself assists his family:

All members of this community, they don't only help their nation, they help their families at home too. Every three or four months I help my brother, who has four orphaned children. My brother was killed by Ethiopia [in the border war], and these four children, they go to school, they have a few goats and some cows, and they commute like five or ten miles to school. So now, all the people who live in diaspora help their families. . . . their mother or father, or both parents, their sister or brother, aunt or uncle, they send something every month, and when they go visit every one or two or three years, they have a good connection. They are welcomed at home and they feel at home, maybe they build a little house for them, or they send them money and they build a place in their grandfather's village.

Among Eritreans at home, relatives living abroad who send remittances to their families are deeply valued and spoken of highly for their ongoing sense of responsibility. Conversely, those who do not send money or goods earn some resentment among their local relatives unless there is a developed consciousness about ratios of need versus want. For example, quite a few relatives of Chicago Eritreans I interviewed reported that they neither receive nor want regular remittances from their diaspora kin because their existing standard of living satisfied them, and that they only requested items that were difficult to get or when the family faced times of particular need.²⁷ For these people, like the government official quoted earlier, not requiring diaspora assistance appeared to be a source of pride consistent with Eritrean notions of self-reliance. Others, however, seemed obsessed with how much certain relatives had sent compared to others, assigning “good” and “bad” values to them according to the commitment they showed. One middle-aged man whose youngest sister lives in Chicago contrasted her generosity and fulfillment of obligation with the lack of concern shown by his older brother, also a US resident:

The help she gives is -- I can't even express it. I wish I were a rich person; if Abeba asked me for money to go around the world I would have given it to her. She was sending \$300 a month to my mother when she was still alive. She sends clothes and other things too. My brother? He doesn't have the mentality to send anything here, so Abeba was sending a lot of money. . . . I wouldn't expect her to be the youngest. In a household, most of the time, the oldest is the lifeblood of the house and is the one in charge of keeping things together. But in our case, it's different. My oldest brother [who also lives in the US], I don't know what happened to him. He just changed. But Abeba? She has taken his place.

In addition to the actual money and goods sent from abroad, other messages about opportunities abroad conveyed in ways both subtle and overt by diaspora kin awaken the consciousness of many Eritreans, particularly young people, to the limited opportunities they face in Eritrea. This new awareness of the massive disparities between life in the US and Eritrea generates frustration, dissatisfaction, distorted images of life in the west, and sometimes unhealthy fixations. For fundamentally, Eritrea remains a country of great

²⁷ Al-Ali, Black and Koser (2001:592) discovered similar patterns in their cursory comparative study of Eritrean transnationalism in Germany, the UK and Eritrea.

sacrifices, where people are expected to serve their country and the memory of those who died for its independence without complaint or resistance. The differences between life in Eritrea and America appear stark: in Eritrea, military training and at least eighteen months of National Service are compulsory for everyone age eighteen to forty, and individual choices related to education, career, or family are circumscribed by chronic underdevelopment at the structural level and the social and economic demands placed by the government on its citizens.²⁸ Life in America, however, offers seemingly endless opportunities and resources, as well as a way to help those left behind, illustrated by the role that exiles play in their relatives' lives.

One young university student, Hintsä, depends upon his uncle Tsegai, a Chicago businessman, for assistance with everything from school fees to general living expenses. He remains fixated on the mysterious power he imagines his uncle and aunt must have to bring him to the United States. Bumping along on a country bus from his home village to Asmara, where we had visited his extended family together, Hintsä explained to me how Tsegai is a good man, while his other uncle, Bereket, is bad because he rarely sends money. Later, in an interview, he elaborated on how he imagined his uncle Tsegai's life in Chicago and why he wanted to join him in the US:

²⁸ National Service [*agelglot*] often lasts much longer than 18 months, dragging on for as long as the government instructs people to continue (sometimes upwards of five years). Their labors, which range from construction to serving in government ministries, are remunerated with about 140 nakfa per month, or about \$15. Men are often stationed long distances from their homes and families, disabling their economic participation in their households and delaying their ability to marry and start families themselves. Pregnancies have also become a disturbing new pattern among young, unmarried women as they seek ways to avoid long stints in the military and National Service. Random sweeping of city streets and constant checking of paperwork by armed soldiers has also become more common, signaling a major intergenerational conflict between the former fighters who make up the bulk of the government and the restless young people they charge with laziness, ingratitude, and lack of national commitment. Indeed, National Service is an extremely important tool of nationalist reproduction intended to enculturate young people who did not fight in the revolution with the lifestyle of the former guerrilla fronts. Several young people described to me the grueling experience of National Service and military training in particular as "cramming thirty years of struggle into six months." Similarly, the summer student campaigns, or *keremtawi ma'etot*, in which I participated in 1995 as a volunteer, acclimates high school students to similar values of hard work and sacrifice for nation-building.

Oh, he is the richest man! He owns two businesses. . . . I think they are living a good life in the USA. Everybody is going to America. I think because they are living a good life, they can help their families in this country and every country. You can improve your life there. I like my country, but you know you cannot improve your life here. . . . [Tsegai's wife] was here, she just visited. She sees we are living badly, like sheep. Everything is expensive and there is also the problem of National Service. Because of that problem, I am asking them to help me. I want to get a scholarship and go to the USA.

Thus, the kin and friendship ties that obtain between Eritreans at home and in exile contain within them much more than economic or material transfers. As Levitt (2001:11) has pointed out, social remittances -- "the ideas, behaviors, and social capital that flow from receiving to sending communities" -- have a significant impact on how local people in particular perceive their own status and surroundings. In the Eritrean case, however, the flow tends to occur both ways, in some cases more powerfully from Eritrea to exile than vice-versa. Eritreans living abroad depend upon their family members and friends for crucial information about everyday living conditions and social and political developments, which in turn shapes their feelings and actions towards Eritrea. Just as during the days of EFLNA when the most coveted news revolved around what EPLF fighters wore and ate, how they lived and where they slept, so too does direct news from home allow Eritreans in exile to feel connected to life on the ground and to make decisions about how to act towards their families, friends, the state, and other institutions.

At the same time, however, a long-developed culture of fear and secrecy, as well as the intense homogenizing pressures of state nationalism, discourage people from carrying on very detailed or politicized discussions through non-secure media like telephones, letters, or even email. This self-censorship is especially prevalent among local Eritreans, who possess sixth-sense awareness of what can and cannot be stated and in what context and company one can speak freely. Locals also hold higher immediate stakes in conforming than their compatriots abroad. Moreover, self-censorship has increased in the years since the Ethio-Eritrean border war, during which time the Eritrean government began repressing internal dissent and other freedoms in the name of national security. Most people I interviewed in Eritrea about the content of their discussions with

family members or close friends in the US refused to discuss whether they talked about politics, insisting that the major content of their discussions revolved around everyday issues like health, well-being, school, work, National Service, and the weather. Similarly, I witnessed several instances in which diaspora Eritreans pushed local kin or friends to speak on topics in public places where locals obviously felt very uncomfortable.

However, even innocuous topics carry a great deal of weight for exiles, who find their own political attitudes influenced by the kinds of situations faced by their relatives. If one's family members or close friends in Eritrea appear to be unhappy or struggling due to social conditions that have emerged due to government policies, the policies themselves -- or the family members -- may become subject to critique. Similarly, because so many families were divided by ELF or EPLF political identities, conversations about everyday life under the EPLF/PFDJ are filtered through old grievances and continue to shape ongoing perceptions of the one-party state among exiles who retain (or have adopted) an oppositional stance. For many other Eritreans living abroad and removed from everyday life, however, no manner of disheartening news from home can cool their support for the PFDJ. These individuals remain intensely faithful to official statements about life on the ground and generally dismiss formal and informal reports that clash with the government's representations or their own beliefs. In turn, they often participate in policing the positions of others who challenge the government line, even if those challenges emerge out of legitimate real life experiences.

II.vi. Internet Communication and Communities

The least regulated but most far-reaching component of the Eritrean trans/nationalist social field to this point has been the Internet, now home to dozens of Eritrean websites, chat rooms, and "cybercommunities." Internet mobilization among Eritreans began in exile communities shortly after independence and later encompassed parts of Eritrea itself after the government signed onto the Leland Initiative in 1999, a

program designed and implemented by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1995 to enhance Internet connectivity in Africa.

In the past several years, Internet usage among Eritreans around the world has burgeoned, providing a free and open forum for discussion about countless issues -- many of them politically or socially sensitive and therefore not publicly debated in Eritrea itself -- as well as the mobilization of resources and other collective efforts. Bernal (2000b) notes how, during the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean border war, Eritreans all over the country used the resources of the Internet to organize fundraising, carry out public relations campaigns, and plan demonstrations at the UN. Indeed, this short list but scratches the surface: today, diverse Eritrean on-line communities accomplish a multiplicity of tasks: they lobby respective foreign governments; disseminate Tigrinya language-learning tools; sell Eritrea-related music, videos, and books; plan and publicize nationwide or regional academic, religious, and sports events; locate assistance from fellow Eritreans (including finding people who can carry items to relatives in Eritrea); post international news about Eritrea and Africa in general; publish statements or open letters on social and political issues by Eritrean NGOs or other groups in exile, such as civic coalitions and human rights groups; and last but not least, organize the gathering reform and opposition movements into political parties and coalitions that hope to establish bases in Eritrea itself. This phenomenon contributes to what Bernal (2000b) refers to as "a new transnational Eritrean public sphere" sustained largely in exile but penetrating local Eritrean society in definite ways and with serious potential for the future.

The Eritrean presence in cyberspace dates to 1993, when five academics in the US -- a Chicagoan among them -- founded a discussion list called Dehai, which roughly means "inside chat" or "news." The list rapidly expanded to about 500 people, and became especially vibrant during the 1994 Constitutional drafting process, when largely well-educated exiles debated everything from the integration of customary and constitutional law to women's rights and the relationship between religion and the state

(Rude 1996). At first the province of those who exclusively supported EPLF, Dehai provided a significant location where Eritreans collectively asserted their national commitment and debated culturally intimate issues. Later, the discussion network grew to include Eritreans around the world of diverse backgrounds and sensibilities, where clashing views often scraped up against the policed boundaries of proper EPLF/PFDJ nationalist discourse. Rumors abounded that Dehai was a government creation and that high officials, including President Isayas himself, assumed screen names in order to engage in more open, democratic debate (see Bernal 2000b). Many discussions carried out in Dehai made their way to Eritrea, as the few people with Internet access prior to 1999 printed out posts that were distributed clandestinely or translated and reprinted in local newspapers.²⁹ This practice continues today, allowing debates and news available only on-line to reach a much broader audience and familiarizing people who may have never used a computer with the concept of the Internet. I was struck on several occasions by elderly, traditional women in both Eritrea and Chicago, many of whom spoke no English and were likely illiterate in Tigrinya, discussing with one another the latest news someone found on this or that website, indicating the extent to which such features had permeated broader Eritrean consciousness.

Today, dozens of Eritrean websites exist, themselves evidence of the multiplicity of political views, identities and interests of their users. All of them contain links to the most updated news articles and reports about Eritrea, as well as commentaries on the issues therein. The Eritrean government also has an official website, www.Shaebia.org, where it reports on development-related issues and posts official statements, managing official government positions against information and interpretations contained in other websites and international reports. The website also contains an entire section devoted to news about the diaspora, from the opening of new community centers around the world to

²⁹ English remains the *lingua franca* of most Eritrean websites, although Tigrinya, Arabic, and other languages are frequently used as well.

copies of letters sent to politicians or newspapers regarding their attitude toward Eritrea.³⁰ Other websites, like www.Awate.com, articulate oppositional perspectives and identify with ELF members and positions, highlighting the Muslim- and Arabic-friendly quality of their constituents. One of the most versatile sites remains www.Asmarino.com, where people of every persuasion engage in lively debate, advertise all manner of events, and can link up to other Eritrea-related resources and information. The sites are almost all moderated by staff members, who enforce guidelines of respectability and civility, safeguarding against vituperative ad-hominem attacks that ran rampant on early sites like Dehai and remain a feature of Eritrean communication patterns overall.

Among Eritreans, the virtual debates and the real ones clearly overlap (Rude 1996:19) in many different arenas. All of the components of the trans/national social field I have discussed here, from PFDJ to mass organizations, churches, NGOs, and informal social networks of kin and friends, draw upon the Internet to build and sustain the relationships, material flows, and identities that make up the connective channels between Eritrea and exile. Similarly, the Internet has become the most powerful medium for organizing new global political movements and articulating the latest ideas about concepts like human rights, democracy, and civil society among Eritreans living all over the world, in part because it reaches far-flung communities instantaneously, and also because it cannot be controlled effectively by any authoritative body. It is still important to note, however, that long before the birth of the Internet and other new technologies of globalization, the EPLF had developed a trans/national structure nearly as effective in its day as the Internet is today.

Clearly, many discussions and debates taking place on-line often remain stuck there, disembodied and lacking practical impact on Eritrea itself, thus representing an

³⁰ Other websites also carry regular columns dedicated to diaspora issues and views. For example, one column on Asmarino.com is entitled “Erespora,” indicating the intensity with which Eritrea and its diaspora inhabit the same trans/national space.

elevated form of the “tea-house talk.” However, as Rude (1996) noted, early members of Dehai recognized the potential such a network might have for creating real impacts in Eritrea. The successful organization of many efforts over Eritrean Internet networks, from famine and drought relief (sponsored by EDF), to briefings by visiting government officials and founding conferences of opposition parties, attests to the validity of the Internet as a facilitator for more concrete interventions. Indeed, even in Eritrea itself, urban dwellers and especially youth gravitate towards the Internet as the main source of information about their country and the rest of the world. Following the closing of the private presses in August 2001, the Internet became the only non-state source of news available in Eritrea. While the television networks and two state-owned newspapers reproduced news available on Eritrean websites and about Eritrean activities in diaspora that emphasized support for the government and unflagging national loyalty, the Internet allowed access to the critical discussions and independent reports otherwise unavailable. A quick glance at the browser history on any public computer revealed the extent to which local Eritreans accessed websites with critical or oppositional content. And familiarity with the users themselves and the paranoia with which some glanced over their shoulders to see who might notice what they were reading suggested that even free information might come at a price.

III: The Ties That Choke: Trans/Nationalism’s Janus Face

In the first published essay addressing Eritrean transnational practices and identities to date, Al-Ali, Black and Koser (2001:595) propose the concept of “enforced transnationalism” to describe the way in which “state policy, the context of flight, historical antecedents, or the dominance of particular ideological, moral, or cultural positions can combine to constrain or push transnational activities in certain ways.”³¹

³¹ Excepting my own essay on Eritrean transnational religion (Hepner 2003b) and Matsuoka and Sorenson’s (2001) volume on Eritrean and Ethiopian communities in Canada, which actually uses the

Their comparative analysis of Bosnian and Eritrean refugees in the UK and Germany as emergent transnational communities explores the historical, political-economic and socio-cultural factors that stimulate transnationalism. Their conclusions articulate several important points also supported by my own findings.

First, they argue that analyses of transnational practices should begin with the historical realities surrounding the conditions of migration. They note that Eritrean transnational activities emerged relatively early among refugees in Germany and the UK in the 1970s, under the tutelage of EPLF, its mass organizations, and NGOs like ERA, and within the context of the nationalist struggle for independence. These historical realities, as we have seen throughout this study, have dramatically shaped the development of the trans/national social field. Secondly, they note that “an understanding of Eritrean transnational activities needs to be grounded in the social realities of relations within the diaspora” and in the relations between the diaspora, the Eritrean state, and kin and friends at home (2001:592). Additionally, they indicate the extent to which nationalism, nation-building, and strength of the nation-state as an administrative unit remain key aspects of transnationalism (see also Fuglerud 1999; Kong 1999; Louie 1999). Accordingly, their position is supported by the evidence they offer of the Eritrean state’s consistent efforts towards institutionalizing political-economic and cultural relations with the diaspora. Their observations about the forces that motivate and capture Eritreans within transnational practices leads them to suggest that such relationships emerge from a simultaneous bubbling-up of “transnationalism from below” (Smith and Guarnizo 1998) initiated by Eritrean refugees themselves, and the state’s administrative and ideological “regime of power” (Ong 1999) bearing down from above.

In the previous sections, I have laid out in detail the emergence and trajectory of the various components that together comprise the Eritrean trans/national social field.

concept of long-distance nationalism as opposed to transnationalism, but nonetheless addresses similar issues.

These “ties that bind” entail -- indeed *require* -- certain kinds of commitments, practices, identities, and sacrifices of diaspora Eritreans as they confront the challenges of deterritorialized citizenship. In turn, the trans/national social field enables cross-participation between Eritrea and exile. Some of these components are relatively well-developed institutionally, such as the one-party state, mass organizations or Unions, and NGOs. Others, like religious bodies, occupy a more ambiguous position, while the flows occurring between kin and friends, and over the Internet, remain far less regulated. To this point, we have focused on the ways that these relationships enable, affirm, and reveal the ongoing efforts to integrate Eritrea and exile into a single, unified nation-state (albeit not without definite dilemmas and contradictions). In this regard my treatment of the Eritrean case remains rather consistent with much of the literature on transnational processes, which tends to stress the enabling, emancipatory, and beneficial aspects of having “a foot in each world” (Basch et al 1994; see also Foner 1997:368).

But there is another side to the story of Eritrea’s trans/national reality, one that resonates more deeply with Al-Ali et al’s (2001) notion of enforced transnationalism. Inasmuch as the components of Eritrean trans/nationalism contribute to expanding ideas and practices of citizenship, national belonging, identity, and responsibility, they also limit and control certain kinds of practices, institutions, and identities. Because of Eritrea’s particular history of nationalism, revolution, and refugee flows, the evolution of its trans/national social field has been closely managed by the state, represented by EPLF prior to independence and PFDJ after. The state’s own interests in (re)producing proper national subjects and maintaining the political-economic and cultural loyalty of its citizens abroad has created a situation where the state, through the deployment of its post-revolutionary moral economy (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001) as well as its own administrative powers, intervenes in most aspects of Eritrean trans/national life. As a result, the trans/national social field often becomes a battleground where struggles over national identity, belonging, and state-society power take place. Moreover, the kinds of

financial and moral demands made upon Eritrean citizens in exile prevents the development of stable community institutions in exile and effective “reterritorialization” in American society, as chapter four demonstrated. In this way, the ties that bind Eritrea and exile can also choke.

III. i. Trans/National Dissonance in the 21st Century

We have already seen how certain dilemmas arise for Eritreans as they build and engage in trans/national institutions and networks. Prior to independence, organizations like EFLNA and chapters of EPLF faced some unique challenges. For EFLNA, the ability to think and act autonomously, as well as draw upon lessons and resources not necessarily embedded within local Eritrean realities (such as feminism or internationalist political philosophies) diminished as the organization became more tightly bound to EPLF itself. For chapters of EPLF, reproducing the front’s administrative power and nationalist orientation in exile proved difficult in communities numerically dominated by former ELF affiliates. Post-independence, these challenges have but multiplied as Eritreans at home and abroad seek concrete methods for both integration and autonomy amidst ever-proliferating identities and interests. Profoundly conflicted questions lie at the heart of the trans/national arrangement: in what ways must Eritreans in the US continue being and becoming Eritrean in order to meet the demands of nationalist identity and citizenship, and in what ways should they engage with their societies of settlement? And for whose benefit -- the Eritrean state’s, or their own? Can both be accommodated?

The ways in which trans/national engagements limit, repress, and disable exile integration into local Eritrean and American society are sometimes subtle and sometimes overt, but are almost always related to the Eritrean state’s administrative power and nation-building objectives. Moreover, they must be contextualized within the history of the revolution, the structural dynamics of migration, and the EPLF/PFDJ’s own synthetic nationalist definitions. These definitions, as we have seen, remain ambivalent at best

towards external political-economic and cultural influences, whether they emanate from the international system of nation-states and associated discourses and ethics, or from Eritreans who live abroad. At the same time, however, deterritorialized citizens remain subjects of the Eritrean nation-state, responding to the state's demands in ways that are consistent with the nationalist revolution's goals of self-reliance.

Within the components of the trans/national social field I have analyzed in this chapter, these struggles and contradictions materialize both practically and discursively. Within NUEW and NUEYS, for example, constituents in diaspora are encouraged by the Unions in Asmara to develop relationships with surrounding American communities or institutions, and to familiarize themselves with their dual Eritrean and American environments. While defined by both NUEW and NUEYS as important for diaspora Eritreans, engaging with American civil society or succeeding in education and career goals nonetheless derive their meaning in relationship to the Eritrean state's own objectives. The benefits for Eritrean individuals or communities as "ethnic" populations in the US remains much less important, except in terms of what a strong ethnic lobby might accomplish on behalf of Eritrea as a whole. Indeed, the realities Eritreans abroad occupy and what membership in NUEW and NUEYS can do for them as migrants and minorities in their societies of settlement remains largely unaddressed. Rather, the emphasis placed by both NUEW and NUEYS on education and self-improvement both at home and abroad is meaningful in the trans/national context largely according to Eritrean realities: skilled Eritreans and strong, capable diaspora communities mean a stronger and more capable Eritrea.

Similarly, as institutionalized avenues that define, direct, and organize the methods by which their constituents engage with local Eritrean society, NUEYS and NUEW are able to deflect the kinds of social remittances that conflict with the state's objectives. For example, a Chicago woman who approached NUEW leaders in Asmara about her idea to found a series of western-style daycare centers in Eritrea encountered

resistance on several levels. First, NUEW officials explained their concern that violence, drug abuse, and other social ills in America could be related to absent parents and the daycare system, and that reproducing such a system in Eritrea could result in similar social problems. Secondly, a lack of support from NUEW, so closely aligned with the PFDJ, signaled major structural obstacles in the realm of the state itself that circumventing the Union would not alleviate. Given the dearth of other independent women's organizations, no other mechanism for fulfilling this woman's dream existed, leading her to abandon it altogether. Moreover, NUEW's continuing focus on poor and rural women has led many professional women in the diaspora away from the Union altogether, who view it as unresponsive to their concerns.

A similar situation exists with NUEYS, despite its more proactive efforts to mobilize diaspora youth and take on the often uncomfortable challenges of cultural (re)integration. In this area too, both in terms of culture and skills or technology transfer, NUEYS, like NUEW, privileges Eritrean realities almost to the exclusion of diasporan ones. Although this is not very surprising, many diasporic conditions that diverge from local ones -- and yet remain common to Eritrean communities abroad -- cannot be addressed through NUEYS's circumscribed objectives. As a result, the kinds of social problems Eritrean youth in diaspora face, including racial and ethnic discrimination, violence, urban gang-related problems and exposure to drug and alcohol abuse, are generally not acknowledged as important aspects of their lives. Similarly, the positive gains and opportunities available to Eritrean youth in diaspora are valued by NUEYS insofar as they help achieve the Eritrean nationalist state's objectives. Questions about NUEYS's relevance to many diaspora youth inevitably arise, and a sense that diasporan realities are taken seriously only insofar as they converge with Eritrean ones, leads many young people to reject involvement in NUEYS.

Finally, many young people who live in places like the US seem uneasy with the PFDJ's authoritative presence and the very different notion of "freedom" in Eritrea.

generally. This uneasiness contributes to a sense of their own otherness in Eritrean society, and likely deters some youth from participating in events that bring them in close contact with local peers and the state itself. Institutions like NUEW and NUEYS therefore cannot accommodate -- or actively exclude -- certain trans/nationally constructed practices and identities while blocking associated social remittances that may be odds with local goals or realities. And while both Unions have achieved some success in integrating Eritrea and exile, it is difficult to see at present how far this trajectory will go unless diasporic realities, identities, skills, and objectives are more openly addressed and validated. For while diaspora Eritreans of all ages feel a great deal of national commitment and pride, it seems likely that they will lose interest in the kinds of approaches NUEW and NUEYS have developed thus far if their experiences and abilities are not recognized as authentically Eritrean.

Moreover, even within NGOs that more readily seek to integrate skilled exiles into current development efforts, frustration among recruits emerges out of similar patterns: the skills and knowledge they possess that the state deems good and useful is sought, while other recommendations they may propose are denied if they do not readily fit within the state's existing scheme or if they challenge hierarchies of power and prestige. Thus, a volunteer with Haben complained bitterly in an interview that although he had a doctorate in his field, the less educated government officials he worked with constantly asserted their authority and experience in the liberation struggle as a way of devaluing his educational achievements abroad, and were resistant to many of his unfamiliar ideas because they did not emerge immediately out of local experience.

The Unions, NGOs, and the PFDJ party itself share obvious structural continuity with the state. (For all intents and purposes, the PFDJ party is the state). As a result, both the continuity they enable between Eritrea and exile and the dissonance they generate are linked to the state's own administrative control and the role of official nationalism in defining which practices, identities, and forms of knowledge or skills are desirable and

which are not. Through these trans/national mechanisms, the state is able to block or ignore certain social remittances, identities and interests while enabling others. Through the same mechanisms, it seeks to reproduce its own administrative power and national identity in diaspora, through chapters of PFDJ and the *mahber kom*, or community association. Yet, as we have also seen, this state presence and authority is deeply contested in places like Chicago. From struggles over defining, organizing, and leading “the community” to the role of PFDJ in helping reproduce proper national subjects and citizens, Eritreans abroad -- including those who support the government -- live with intense ambivalence about where and how they fit into Eritrean and American societies.

Additionally, the trans/national presence of the state, conflated with the PFDJ party, has encouraged the development of opposition parties and coalitions in exile. In some ways, this trend is a natural outgrowth of Eritrea’s own trans/national realities and the politics of migration, which deposited abroad much of the existing opposition to the EPLF/PFDJ. In other ways, the growth of Eritrean movements ranging from staunch opposition to reformism and international human and social rights agendas has been a response to the state’s increasing power and control over local and trans/national Eritrean society. Although we will address this issue more fully in the next chapter, it is worth quoting one longtime EPLF supporter in Chicago, who stated presciently:

I think to form any political organization outside of Eritrea is a mistake, because the political division in our community is being exacerbated. For what? Because -- instead of bringing the community together there will be division politically. And I really don’t see any benefit of that.

But what of those components of the trans/national social field not easily as subject to state control and intervention, such as religious bodies or kin networks? Here, too, dissonance often prevails and the state retains an authoritative presence even if its control is circumscribed by the larger transnational structures of religious bodies and the privacy of exchanges occurring at the microlevel of family and friends. In terms of churches, the state made several interventions in 2001-2002 that have effected the re-

religious identities and institutions in Eritrea and exile. In addition to circumscribing the ability of religious organizations to participate in NGO and other development work, the state also silenced the Catholic Bishops for their 2001 Pastoral Letter, in which they criticized the government in their evaluations of Eritrea's social and economic progress since independence and the Ethio-Eritrean border war in particular. Composed at a time when Eritrea was reeling from the effects of the war and the government had begun curtailing freedoms and altering traditional patterns in the name of nation-building, the Bishops' critiques were extremely bold. Among their concerns was the notion of freedom in independent Eritrea itself:

When we talk of the past ten years of independence and freedom in Eritrea we refer to a truly free nation whose freedom is the sum of the freedoms of its nationals. We, therefore, necessarily include freedom of conscience and creed, freedom of speech and the press, freedom of communication, and freedom of association and assembly. Only when all citizens of the nation own this kind of comprehensive freedom can we speak of a truly free nation. . . . So it is that we must ask ourselves some awkward questions: Have we always done what is right for all our citizens? Have we, or how have we, used/abused our freedom? Have we always respected the rights of others? Have we understood justice? Have we used the gift of freedom and independence -- attained at such a high price -- worthily?³²

The Pastoral letter deeply angered the PFDJ government, who banned its further distribution in either Tigrinya or English. One Eritrean website, however, managed to get ahold of it and published both the original Tigrinya and an unofficial English translation. For its part, the Church insisted on its duty to speak its conscience; one of the priests I interviewed mused aloud about a time when the same people now silencing the Church had once taken great inspiration from the Church's critique of the Ethiopian Derg regime during the days when they were still freedom fighters and not yet government officials. Similarly, on a visit one afternoon to the main Cathedral on Liberation Avenue, where I shared tea with several priests and monks, I was surprised to hear them discussing with enthusiasm the recently released letter to the President written by several members of the

³² From the official translation of the 2001 Pastoral Letter of the Eritrean Catholic Bishops, article 3, p. 2-3.

PFDJ's Central Committee, in which they called for democratic reforms.³³ Shortly thereafter, however, the Church's press -- the oldest in Eritrea -- was shut down, and the authors of the letter to the President imprisoned.

The state did not limit its intervention to the Catholic Church, however. In early 2002, the government closed indefinitely all new charismatic churches, including the *Mulu Wangeel Biet Kristyan Asmara*, which had burgeoned dramatically since the Ethio-Eritrean border war, as well as some older ones such as the 7th Day Adventist Church. In May of that same year, the state revoked the official status of all faiths except Orthodox Christian, Muslim, Catholic, and the long-established Lutheran Church.³⁴ Concerned that these new religious movements had attracted so many converts from Eritrea's own traditional faiths, introduced foreign beliefs and practices into Eritrean religious life, and established new connections with non-Eritrean religious institutions, the government asserted its authority despite the formal separation of religion and state. In exile locations like Chicago, however, the churches continued to grow in numbers and strength, far outpacing the community association, NUEW, and PFDJ as effective community institutions (see Hepner 2003b). As we have seen earlier, these organizations are relatively well insulated from the trans/national intervention of the state so far due to their membership or connections to international, ecumenical bodies and their autonomy in American society, and as such have become important, self-sustaining diasporic resources. Additionally, they provided a space for Eritreans to come together and practice their culture and traditions without the ever-present politicization of secular organizing. The limiting of religious institutions and practice in Eritrea itself, however, creates major obstacles for the institutionalization of trans/national relationships between congregations in diaspora and religious bodies in Eritrea. It also sends a clear message about the power

³³ See Appendix B.

³⁴ The state has refused to officially recognize independent "new churches" like *Mulu Wangeel*, however.

of the state and the ongoing nationalist project to homogenize and subsume all other identities, if not through discourse then via sheer administrative muscle.

Among family and friends whose networks span Eritrea and exile, informal relationships also provide some autonomy from the kinds of state regulations that shape and limit other aspects of local and exile life. Private remittances, one of the major ways that diaspora Eritreans contribute to local society, has not been regulated by the state to this point. It also remains unclear whether and to what extent the state effectively monitors communications via telephone, letters, and email. Nonetheless, many people believe that the government does intrude on their private conversations, making them reluctant to share certain kinds of information or perspectives with one another. Similarly, some diaspora Eritreans have become skeptical of the trans/national institutions sanctioned by the state as appropriate modes of integration and participation. The kinds of on-the-ground reports provided by family members and friends inform exiles' perspectives and activities and sometimes lead them to develop new ways of circumventing the state's trans/national presence, if possible. One man in the US, a strong EPLF supporter as a teenager, confided in me over email:

I have been getting more letters from home asking for help, reflecting the dire circumstances of the times. I'm trying to mobilize my foreign friends to help me help people. . . . The way the PFDJ has handled its relationships is full of blunders. The diaspora is now totally distrustful and has lost interest in investing in Eritrea. Hence the attempt to somehow empower kin and relatives by directly sending them money. I know quite a few people who sold their homes and property [in the US] and went home with the intention of permanently settling there. Almost all of them have returned, totally disillusioned and discouraged, and have started building their lives again from scratch. It saddens me in some ways that I can only send money to relatives and friends. I can imagine the pain of those who do not have relatives abroad or whose relatives have chosen to forget them. In some ways, I know that I am contributing to perpetuating the class inequality that is emerging. However, I see no other way around it, under the economic and political reality created by PFDJ.

Thus, the presence of the state in virtually every other area of trans/national political-economic and social life and the obstacles it creates has led some exiles to view private remittances as the only way to truly participate in Eritrean society. At the same

time, transformations in local Eritrean consciousness regarding material items and consumerism, largely due to their contact with family and friends in exile, generates new burdens for those who live abroad. Many Eritreans in the US, partly driven by a sense of guilt over “abandoning” Eritrea for a more privileged existence in the US, and partly encouraged by the status they achieve through remittances, have chosen to live frugally in America so their families can achieve stability at home. Others who have worked very hard to build lives for themselves in the US feel overwhelmed by the extent of their families’ financial and social crises at home. One young Chicago woman who came to the US as a refugee when she was a child and went on to graduate from a prestigious university and land a well-paying job, carries so much of the weight for her entire extended family that she has suffered debilitating bouts of depression and dreads the thought of returning to Eritrea even for short visits. With sadness etched in her face, she explains:

I always felt so much spirit, so much love for my country. I *loved* Eritrea. Now I’m like -- I don’t ever want to go back to Eritrea. I associate it with neediness, with everybody wanting something from me, with everyone bringing their child and saying, ‘Here is my child, take them to America.’ Like I could just [snaps fingers]. I associate it with people who don’t want to try to make the most of what they fought for, what their sons and daughters fought for. I see it as a place people want to run away from. I don’t know. I don’t like how I feel, but I can’t help it. I don’t know how to make people understand that just because I live in the US I am not made of money.

Conversely, many local Eritreans are enormously frustrated by their family members in exile who do not seem to grasp the realities that structure local peoples’ lives, insisting on reading them from either an idealized, frozen picture of Eritrean life and politics, or their own altered subjectivities as denizens of the US. A young woman I befriended in Asmara vented her feelings on me one afternoon as we sat together in her family’s comfortable living room. Our conversation had ranged widely, from her experiences as a university student to the climate that seized Asmara following the border war. She explained:

This is a new culture, the idea of raising your voice. Eritreans are not like that, we do not protest when we are unhappy with a situation. Here the government does not like that, and you never know what can happen. The best is to lose your job, at least you still are with family and all of that. If they put you in prison, you are alone and isolated. People are afraid. We do not speak our minds or stir up conflict, but we are all very frustrated. Like my husband. He is nearly forty and is still doing National Service. He is extremely unhappy. He can't do anything else, he has no choice. He has no freedom. We cannot do what we wish, we are bound to do what the government tells us. And these diaspora people, they do not understand what life is like here for us. My husband's sister came for the wedding from the United States and she asked my husband why he didn't just get a job doing something he likes or wants to do. She doesn't understand that your life does not belong to you, you cannot make such choices. And then with politics? She calls and says 'Why are the people making President Isayas sad?' and I just want to scream at her that she knows nothing about what life is like here.

V. Concluding Remarks

This chapter has explored in detail the structural features of the contemporary Eritrean trans/nationalist social field and how they shape communities in places like Chicago, as well as Eritrea itself. Many of the patterns that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s continue to reverberate throughout these exchanges. Most important among these is the strength of the Eritrean trans/national state. At the same time, however, the uneven institutionalization of the trans/national social field conjoining Eritrea and exile has created unanticipated opportunities for resistance among both local Eritreans and exiles. It has also revealed the extent to which state nationalism cannot provide an inclusive, meaningful narrative for all Eritreans, and especially those who remain politically at odds with EPLF/PFDJ. Even for loyal supporters, however, we have seen how the trans/national social field is rife with contradictions and limitations, again drawing attention to the vulnerability of the state's administrative power and hinting at possible alternatives.

While the state does not necessarily intervene directly in all of the trans/national exchanges occurring between Eritreans at home and abroad, it retains a constant presence in the lives and imaginations of Eritreans everywhere. In other ways it does directly intervene, either retaining ultimate administrative authority over the form and

content of trans/national flows, or creating obstacles that deflect or delegitimize certain kinds of social remittances. Today, the patterns of trans/nationalism remain a central feature of the modern Eritrean nation-state and carry on the long tradition of co-constructing and contesting the meaning and practice of Eritrean national identity, responsibility, and citizenship. Thus, while Eritrea may in fact represent one of the first genuinely trans/national nation-states, it may also offer some unique and cautionary insights about the dual nature of transnationalism itself, reminding us how the ties that bind can also choke.

The constraints associated with the Eritrean trans/nationalist arrangement under EPLF/PFDJ, and the long-standing difficulties within communities like Chicago's due to the state's presence abroad, have given rise to important forms of resistance already hinted at in this chapter. Whether inspired by former ELF pluralist nationalism and oppositional or sub-national identities, or provoked by the recent repressive turn taken by the Eritrean state against its citizens, organizations completely beyond the purview of the Eritrean trans/national social field have also begun seeking intervention into Eritrea for the sake of changing it. These organizations and movements, whether operating on platforms for human rights or alternative political configurations, strongly support the existence of the Eritrean state but are extremely critical of the existing power arrangements both locally and trans/nationally. Adopting the language of democracy and civil society, they have reached back into Eritrea's past to locate the roots of these putatively western features within Eritrean society and culture, and now seek to apply them -- and lessons they have learned in exile -- via the trans/national social field that once belonged solely to EPLF. The role of Eritreans in exile as a component of trans/national civil society is the subject of the next and final chapter of this study.

CHAPTER SIX

A Trans/National Civil Society: Power, Authority, and Belonging in Eritrea and Exile

I. Sovereignty and Its Consequences

In May 1998, just five years after Eritrea secured independence, war again engulfed the Horn of Africa. During the intervening period of peace and relative stability, Eritrea appeared both to itself and to many onlookers around the world -- in the words of one high school student I met in the summer of 1995 -- "the shining new hope for Africa." The energy emanating from the continent's newest nation-state was palpable, infectious. Amidst the euphoria of sovereignty, Eritreans threw themselves into reconstruction. With the same resolve, sacrifice, and ingenuity that characterized much of the nationalist revolution, people of all ages and backgrounds participated in building roads, schools, clinics and homes, reforesting denuded lands and terracing mountainsides, collectively salving a landscape and consciousness wounded from over three decades of upheaval. Former members of ELF as well as longtime EPLF affiliates in exile flocked to be among the first to return, some falling to their knees upon arrival, weeping into the earth. The newly-minted state authorities worked as virtual volunteers, shunning the cults of personality and elitism that characterized so many other postcolonial African leaderships. For Eritreans all over the world, the new nation-state embodied the pent-up aspirations of generations of sufferers.

The explosion of the border war with Ethiopia in mid-1998 therefore descended like another nightmare upon a people just barely recovering from the last. Almost without warning (or so it seemed) a spat between local authorities mushroomed into a full-scale war. Hundreds of thousands of troops were mobilized and tens of thousands of new land mines laid. As Ethiopia rounded up its citizens of Eritrean heritage and deported them *en*

masse to the Eritrean border in wave after wave of despair, Ethiopians living in Eritrea fled their homes and businesses in fear for their lives.¹ And as the gains of seven years' peace in Eritrea withered for lack of nourishment, a fearsome incarnation of nationalism gathered strength at home and abroad. Responding to the calls of President Isayas Afwerki and the PFDJ, Eritreans all over the world consolidated their efforts to protect what they believed was the very existence of their nation-state.

In the scant two years following, more than one hundred thousand Eritreans and Ethiopians lost their lives and several million more their homes and livelihoods. Drought and famine stalked communities, weeding out the weak and vulnerable, breaking spirits among the strong. Erstwhile economic peaks tumbled to valleys. Families who had already lost several members in the liberation war waited to hear the fate of yet others who had gone to the border. And perhaps most importantly, the energy that initially sustained resurgent nationalism began turning in on itself, evoking questions for which no satisfactory answers could be found, and casting doubt upon leaders who revealed themselves to be merely men after all.

There were many consequences of the Ethio-Eritrean border war and too few reasons (see Hepner 2000b; Negash and Tronvoll 2000; Tronvoll 1999). As the smoke cleared and the devastation was exposed, many Eritreans found themselves in disbelief that such a thing had happened. Exiles living in places like the United States drew upon their broadened knowledge to wonder aloud -- many for the first time -- about the meaning of government accountability, democracy, constitutionalism, and the rule of law in Eritrea. International bodies such as the United Nations, moreover, and other agencies concerned with aid, development, conflict resolution and rights, subjected Eritrea to the

¹ The forced removal of Eritreans and Ethiopians on both sides of the border has been one of the most deplorable and psychologically damaging aspects of the war. While the deportation of Eritreans from Ethiopia has been reasonably well documented by scholars and international human rights groups, it nonetheless remains subject to manipulation and misinformation. The same is true of the forced removal of Ethiopians from Eritrea. See Hepner 2000b; Legesse et al 1998; Negash and Tronvoll 2000; Tronvoll 1999; Woldeselassie 2000 for various kinds of analyses or accounts.

kinds of criticism befitting a member of the world system of nation-states. Besieged from all sides, the Eritrean government retreated into its alter ego as a revolutionary front by reasserting nationalist principles like self-reliance and democratic centralism. Manipulating the notion of “African solutions for African problems” and the African Union’s policies of non-interference, the Eritrean government imputed its nonaccountability for the war through the tautology of “national defense.” After so many years of working to establish legitimacy, and then sacrificing so much to protect it, the Eritrean state nonetheless seemed prepared to reject the very principles underpinning its claims. And despite its celebrated Constitution, the state also appeared to be saying -- to its own people and the rest of the world -- that it would neither play by those rules nor by anyone else’s. The great promise at independence lay in tatters on the battlefield, near a dusty border town called Badme.

The border war had a monumental impact in Eritrea and exile. Although most everyone had responded to the call of defending the nation-state as dutiful and patriotic citizens, many nonetheless questioned how a genuine and civil nation-state could choose war over extended diplomacy. Among members of the government and former EPLF supporters who felt uneasy with PFDJ’s policies since independence, a reform movement began developing an alternative political agenda as it sought to reclaim the vision of independence.² For those who had long nurtured a critical perspective, and among former ELF members in particular, the vestiges of an organized movement in exile also sprang into action. New chapters of the Eritrean Liberation Front - Revolutionary Council (ELF-RC), headquartered in Germany, began opening up all over the world (including in Chicago). Utilizing both the Internet and informal social networks, coalitions of political groups joined together and held conventions from Addis Ababa to Stockholm. Other civic

² The hallmark platform of the reform movement is the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front - Democratic Party (EPLF-DP), formed in exile by Mesfin Hagos, a founding member of EPLF and former Minister of Defense for the PFDJ. After his defection from PFDJ in 2000, he has continued to live in exile and organize among Eritreans abroad. See Plaut (2002) for a brief analysis of the reform movement since the border war.

movements proliferated at a rate too swift to follow, announcing their formation, mission statements, and upcoming events on popular Eritrean websites. Among them were those advocating human and civil rights agendas and democratization through civil society institutions and practices, as they searched for authentic examples of these in Eritrean history and culture to stake claims on the state. Drawing upon the trans/nationalist social field that had sustained the Eritrean revolution and emergent nation-state since the 1970s, a new kind of Eritrean public sphere took shape. Within it, Eritreans began debating in new ways the meaning of the nation and nationalist identity, the arrangement of power and authority in Eritrea, and practices of citizenship that accompanied national belonging for the first time since the British Military Administration years.

The emergence of this public sphere, built both deliberately and improvisationally upon the trans/national foundation forged by EPLF and the Eritrean diaspora, reveals the transculturation of Eritrean specificities and global generalities as they graft onto one another. Just as the Eritrean state under PFDJ has deployed the ideologies, pragmatic practices and administrative authority associated with the revolutionary nationalist years to compel its citizens to think and act in certain ways, many of those citizens are now drawing upon their experiences as exiles, and the resources available to them abroad, to make demands upon that state. Similarly, within Eritrea, many people -- including journalists, students, intellectuals, activists, and elites -- are now looking towards international constructs of democracy, rights, and civic participation to evaluate the Eritrean condition. And while they cannot effectively (or safely) organize on those bases within Eritrea itself, they are utilizing the trans/nationalist social field to connect with compatriots and external actors who can.

In the following pages, I step back from the structural and historical details of Eritrea's trans/nationalist situation to examine how and why recent movements and claims to democracy and civil society express important dynamics about Eritrea's place in a larger global order. More specifically, I address how Eritreans are coping with the

failure of a nationalist, authoritarian state to deliver on its promises by engaging broader models of citizenship, rights, and belonging. While the Eritrean state has obstructed certain trans/national interventions into local Eritrean society to preserve its own power and nationalist hegemony, it has also encouraged Eritreans abroad to utilize the ideas and resources of their adopted countries for the benefit of Eritrea. This contradictory impulse -- insisting upon exclusivist nationalism while drawing upon exiled populations and the international resources to which they have access -- is what I have referred to throughout this study as trans/nationalism. The contradictory effects trans/nationalism produces, moreover, are what I have described as “trans/national dissonance.”

As we have seen, trans/nationalism and trans/national dissonance have forced Eritreans in exile into a liminal space where they are neither fully accepted in Eritrea nor fully integrated into their societies of settlement. But as Turner (1969), Douglas (1966), and Leach (1976) argued, liminality can be an especially powerful (and dangerous) location, precisely because it situates people between established social structures or spaces. Thus, as Eritreans in exile remain beholden to the nationalist state and its discourses and policies, they also belong -- at least partly -- to those of their societies of settlement and to the larger global order in which they are positioned.

Taking into account both the liminality of the Eritrean exile condition and the emergence of a new public sphere since the border war, I argue in this chapter that Eritrea has witnessed the emergence of a trans/national civil society that operates across multiple borders to intervene in both nation and state. This public sphere is comprised of the trans/national components I analyzed in earlier chapters, and as we have seen, constitutes a location wherein the state's structure, authority, official definitions of nationalism, and requirements for belonging are both reproduced and resisted among exiles, local citizens, and state actors. The emergence of such a trans/national civil society is particularly significant for a marginalized state like Eritrea, which is not only structurally disempowered in the global scheme of nation-states, but is also too weak, authoritarian,

and militarized to sustain (or allow) a vibrant civil society in its own right. On a more general theoretical level, moreover, developing a concept of trans/national civil society helps us better understand how deterritorialized populations may adopt behaviors and deploy concepts associated with global civil society's repertoire (democracy, rule of law, constitutionalism, human and civil rights, religious ecumenism, and the language of civil society itself), but do so exclusively in relation to the local, territorial realities of their sending states (Hepner 2003b).

II. Resistance Revisited: Eritrea at the Crossroads

The year 2001 was an exceptionally significant time in Eritrean history. Not only did the tenth anniversary of Eritrea's independence arrive on May 24, but the months of July to December also witnessed the effervescence of open debate, coupled with swift and unsettling state repression. Part of the public debate about Eritrea's progress in its first decade was initiated by the international Eritrean Studies conference, held in mid-July at the sparkling new Intercontinental Hotel. Supported by the Embassies of Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark, as well as the University of Asmara and the Ministry of Education, the conference drew scholars to Asmara from all over the world to collectively evaluate independent Eritrea's past lessons and future prospects. Economists, historians, social scientists, development experts, religious leaders, political scientists, union organizers, activists, journalists, students, and Eritrean government officials all gathered to present research and debate virtually every thinkable aspect of Eritrea's experience.³

Many of the scholars present were Eritreans who had gone abroad in the 1970s to attend university or graduate school and had become exiles during Eritrea's turbulent revolutionary years. Of those, the vast majority had participated in Eritrea's trans/national

³ Participants from the ELF and other oppositional political movements in exile were noticeably absent. Not a single paper genuinely addressing ELF history or political philosophy was presented.

revolution through EFLNA or other EPLF institutions like the Eritrean Relief Committee (ERC) and the Research and Information Center of Eritrea (RICE). At the same time, they had lived most of their lives in the United States or Europe, and the influences of western social and political discourse were unmistakable in their analyses of the Eritrean condition and their recommendations for its present and future. Questions of democracy, civil society, gender relations, and market economies loomed large, and some well-known scholars delivered accordingly incisive critiques of the nationalist government's policies and social trends since independence.

Balancing the perspectives of academic intellectuals were those of the PFDJ government itself, as former top-level cadres turned top-level officials presented the party's views on many of the same topics addressed by scholars and practitioners. At times their pragmatic, self-assured approaches dovetailed with those of their more independent-minded counterparts. At others, they clashed explosively. Perhaps the greatest examples of this occurred during two plenary sessions, one on the Constitution and constitutionalism, and the other on democratization and the media. Hundreds gathered in a large auditorium to witness (in at least three languages) the encounter between the Eritrean state, represented by PFDJ officials, and the plainspoken elites of the Eritrean trans/nation. The former were determined to demonstrate the correctness of the PFDJ's own positions and the enduring relevance of nationalist ideas like self-reliance and cultural authenticity. The latter faced a more complicated task: to speak at once as patriotic citizens and yet remain true to their task as intellectuals by applying perspectives beyond the state's narrow nationalist scope.⁴

⁴ A range of opinions were present among both government officials and diaspora intellectuals. Some officials proved more critical than the rest of their colleagues and diaspora counterparts, while some diaspora intellectuals supported or defended the government. The stakes for each kind of actor are different, however. At least one high-ranking official was sacked from his post after presenting a very critical indictment of certain PFDJ policies and procedures. Some critical diaspora intellectuals were attacked and later silenced for their views, but nonetheless returned safely to their homes and jobs abroad. See Fessehazion (1999, 2000) for "inside" analyses of the role of Eritrean intellectuals in the construction of national identity and more recent debates about dissenting views.

The international Eritrean Studies conference thus became a landmark wherein a truly public debate took place between representatives of Eritrea's trans/national citizenry and those of the Eritrean state. It also revealed dissenting views among those who comprise the state itself. The conference happened at a time when Eritreans were still reeling from the shock of the border war and restless to pin down both questions and answers. Moreover, it took place in Asmara, where members of local Eritrean society could observe and participate. The penetration of this public debate into local Eritrean consciousness, made possible by the encounter between local and exile sectors of the trans/national state and society via the conference itself, proved even more powerful given the political developments and internal repression of the following months.

II. i. Reform as Dissent: The Groups of Thirteen and Fifteen

Following the border war's de-escalation in mid-2000, many private debates were taking place within the PFDJ and among PFDJ members and supporters around the world. Most of these had to do with the government's own conduct during the war and President Isayas Afwerki's role in particular. Almost immediately, anyone who expressed reservation or open disagreement with the way in which the PFDJ had handled the war was labeled "defeatist" (see Plaut 2002:121). The first to do so were a group of thirteen scholars, nationalist activists, and professionals -- all longtime supporters of EPLF -- who met in Berlin, Germany to draft a letter to Isayas Afwerki regarding their concerns about what appeared to be an increasingly anti-democratic tendency in the government. The G-13, as the signatories came to be called, included among them one of the premier drafters of the Constitution, Dr. Bereket Habte Selassie, as well as other prominent Eritreans, all of whom lived abroad. They composed the letter with the intent that it would only reach the President himself and no one else. Through some unknown mechanism, however, the letter "leaked" to the public, and before long was accessible via every Eritrean website and through the burgeoning independent media in Eritrea itself.

The “Berlin Manifesto,” as it came to be called, created an uproar in the Eritrean trans/nation.⁵ Immediately its signatories were vilified among loyalists for their traitorism, deified by budding reformists for their courage, and scoffed at by staunch oppositionists for being a day late and a dollar short. And despite traveling to Asmara to try to meet with the President himself, the members of the G-13 received little more for their efforts than attacks on their integrity and increasing fear of repercussion among their family members and close associates in Eritrea. In the propaganda wars that followed, they were denigrated for being “diaspora intellectuals” who knew precious little of conditions on the ground and were unduly influenced by “foreign ideas” untranslatable to the Eritrean experience. Moreover, they were portrayed as an isolated group of troublemakers either driven by opportunism or secretly in league with the Ethiopian government. The possibility that they could be part of a larger, long-developing movement or shared consciousness, or that they acted out of patriotic responsibility, was summarily dismissed in official nationalist discourse.

The text of the Berlin Manifesto revealed the dilemma facing so many Eritreans in exile who seek to balance their support for the independent state with grounded critiques of the ruling party and its increasingly problematic nationalist orientation. The letter also revealed the anxiety exiles feel about Eritrea’s image in an international context, where an insistence on either dated revolutionary discourse or exclusivist nationalism may represent a liability for the new, small, and poor African state rather than a source of empowerment and autonomy vis-à-vis the world system. First couching their critique in praise for the historical integrity of the EPLF and the sacrifices made to protect Eritrea’s sovereignty in the border war, the G-13 wrote:

Mr. President, To ask why we have come to this impasse, to inquire into what went wrong, and to reflect upon the cause and conduct of the [border] war, and whether it might have been avoided, is not only legitimate, but it is also the duty of every citizen. . . . [W]e wish

⁵ See Appendix A for a full text of the letter composed in Berlin.

to assure you, on the basis of close observation, that Eritrea's image has never been as bad as it is today. . . . [M]uch of the world community, including our fellow Africans, perceive the Eritrean government and its leadership as aggressive and irresponsible. Eritrea's leadership has been cast, particularly since the start of the war with Ethiopia, as contemptuous of international law and accepted norms of behavior. . . . Even the commendable policy of self-reliance, which many applauded, has now been portrayed as an aspect of arrogance. . . . Hence, there needs to be a critical reappraisal of policy and praxis.

Concerning the way in which the PFDJ government had handled the important issues of reconciliation with former ELF affiliates, the implementation of the Constitution, and the development of institutions for popular political participation since independence, the G-13 also voiced consternation:

We are convinced that we reflect a widely held view among Eritreans that there should be national reconciliation. . . . Wisdom and statesmanship required a call for reconciliation extended to all Eritreans irrespective of belief or political affiliation to join hands in rebuilding a shattered society and economy. It is an opportunity that was lost but that can still be reclaimed. The EPLF (PFDJ) leadership should be willing now to provide political space for groups or individuals. The absence of such space has severely affected the development of civil society and has fostered a feeling of alienation among segments of our society. The Constitution, about which we shall say more below, requires such space in no uncertain terms. . . . A ratified Constitution means that it is already in effect and that the Eritrean people should be enjoying their constitutional rights. We are dismayed to witness the operation of institutions that are clearly and flagrantly in violation of the spirit and letter of the Constitution.

And fairly concluding that "it is no exaggeration to say that, despite some notable progress to its name, the government has failed the nation in some important respect," the authors of the Berlin Manifesto signed off by reaffirming their own duties as citizens and requesting the government fulfill its own:

On our side, we will spare no effort to help secure Eritrea's territorial integrity and national sovereignty. At the same time, we will endeavor to promote a culture of openness, tolerance, accountability and rule of law. To these ends, we intend to broaden our base by convening a larger meeting which will consider your response to this letter. The idea is to begin to institutionalize a government/civil society dialogue on a continuing basis as a critical part of a healthy development of our future.

Despite the careful crafting of the letter and the spirit of solidarity and concerned citizenship in which it was written, like many other forms of trans/national intervention

that challenged the authority of the Eritrean state, the Berlin Manifesto was subjected to the same delegitimization and obstruction as other unwelcome “social remittances” (Levitt 2001) flowing from exile to Eritrea. The leak of the letter to various media, some of it Ethiopian, was perhaps part of this obstruction: immediately setting Eritreans on the defensive, it stymied the G-13’s efforts to open such a public debate. As one of the G-13 members in Chicago explained to me in an interview (much of it off the record), the letter was intended to broach difficult and sensitive issues within a private circle, where it would then expand outwards to the public to become a genuine national conversation. By virtue of pressures exerted by civil society, the government would be forced to address certain issues pertaining to its own internal power structure and ostensible plans for political and social democratization. On the record, this interviewee described both the reaction to the G-13 as well as the impetus that brought them together:

There was a violent reaction [to the letter]. People blamed the G-13 . . . I was a bit surprised by the [Chicago] community’s reaction here, actually. I didn’t know there was so much anti-intellectual attitude . . . Some people were triggered by the leak of the letter, some people felt like the country was in danger and we didn’t have the luxury to criticize the government, the timing wasn’t right, all these things. So there was an anti-intellectual sentiment in the community, especially among ELF people who thought Dr. Bereket and all those guys were supporters of EPLF, and *now* they speak of democracy and reform. For me, it was a welcome change, late is better than never. I never agreed with a lot of things [EPLF/PFDJ] stands for. . . Basically the goal was to create a forum for people to discuss the issues. Because we don’t have that experience, democratic platforms and so on. . . But all of our plans, to travel from city to city, holding public forums, all of it was upstaged by the leak of the letter.

Indeed, the kind of scenario the G-13 envisioned -- a civil debate occurring simultaneously in locations all over the world as Eritreans exercised their constitutional rights and practiced citizenship -- drew directly upon the existing trans/national social field for its own structural efficacy. However, the content of the conversation, and the objectives for mobilizing such a movement, were quite different than anything seen during the days of the revolution. No longer would the issues be about Maoism, Soviet revisionism, or democratic centralism, but rather democracy, constitutionalism, civil



society, and the way in which modern states and citizens should behave.⁶ Significantly, the G-13 also called for reconciliation between former EPLF and ELF opposing identities, indicating the extent to which they understood the problem of political identity in exile. The Berlin Manifesto cannot be underestimated for the important shifts it revealed among certain sectors of the Eritrean trans/nation, in this case longtime supporters of EPLF, who essentially stated that nationalism *in situ* had failed to engender the kind of society they had envisioned, and that the Eritrean state must now consider its place in a global order of nation-states where democracy and civil society are the most acceptable forms of political and social power, whatever they might mean in practice.

Although the G-13 itself could not have proved it at the time given the rigor of the campaigns against them, they were indeed part of a much larger movement mounting from within the historic EPLF camp. In May 2001, exactly three years after the outbreak of the border war, an open letter composed by fifteen members of the PFDJ's Central Committee was released to the Eritrean trans/national public. The document, entitled "An Open Letter to Members of the PFDJ," was written collectively by fifteen individuals within the government itself, who later came to be known as the G-15, and was directed towards the President and his most loyal supporters.⁷ Nearly all of its esteemed signatories were founding or longtime members of EPLF who had dedicated virtually all of their lives to the Eritrean struggle. Among them were Haile Menkerios, a founder of EFLNA and Eritrea's former ambassador to the United Nations; Mesfin Hagos, former Minister of Defense (and current head of the EPLF-DP reform party); and Mahmoud Sherifo, Minister of Local Government. As with the Berlin Manifesto, the letter circulated widely via the Internet, the private Eritrean press, and other underground networks at home and abroad. Many people loyal to the President and PFDJ overall were scandalized.

⁶ Mamdani (1996:19) has cogently noted that, in Africanist circles, the discourse on civil society (and democracy) since the 1980s both resembles, and seems to have replaced, the earlier discourse on socialism.

⁷ See Appendix B for a full text of the G-15 letter.

But perhaps even more looked on with renewed hope and heightening fear about the changes underway.⁸

The letter composed by the G-15 echoed some of the same issues raised by the G-13 in the Berlin Manifesto; however, because state officials themselves wrote it, it was much more difficult for the PFDJ to dismiss as the grumblings of dissatisfied exiles. While the letter focused on many important details regarding what the signatories viewed as an ultimately failed transition between the EPLF as liberation front and the PFDJ as a government, it focused on three major issues overall: the lack of proper legal procedures and “accountability and transparency” in the government; the concentration of power in the hands of President Isayas Afwerki; and the urgent need to begin implementing state and social structures that would support a free and democratic nation, especially in the aftermath of the border war. Reiterating the initial plans EPLF had developed for the new state following the 1993 referendum on independence, the authors reminded their colleagues that:

The Eritrean Government of transition would have legislative, executive and judicial branches, which provide checks and balances on each other. It would establish the rule of law, consolidate national harmony, uphold political pluralism and ensure transparency, tolerance and accountability. It would be free from corruption, and would develop a common national outlook. It would further develop, as guarantees for a democratic political order, a free and powerful judicial branch, a conscious civil society, a free, reliable, critical and responsible mass media, and other democratic institutions.

The authors charged that these plans had been thwarted not only because of the renewed “security threat” posed by Ethiopia, but also because the President himself was unwilling to act as a genuine statesman and respect the principles the provisional government had agreed upon:

⁸ I was conducting fieldwork in Eritrea during the G-15 affair and discovered a range of reactions among local Eritreans. Some were upset and defensive of the President. Some evaded speaking about it at all. Many others, however, expressed support for the message the G-15 sought to convey. I was in fact quite surprised at how many people agreed with the letter, including individuals who had been highly supportive of the PFDJ and of the President on my earlier trips to Eritrea.

Because of the weaknesses of the legislative and executive bodies, the President has been acting without restraint, even illegally. Having been used to taking his unrestricted power for granted, he finds it unacceptable now when attempts are being made to have those bodies work properly as well as correct the weaknesses of the system. The President has become so accustomed to acting freely and as he pleased, he is rejecting democratic dialogue, refusing to convene legally required meetings.

Thus, outlining their own position as reformists and contrasting their respect for philosophies, policies, and procedures befitting a modern nation-state with the rigid, revolution-era nationalist exclusivism being practiced by the President, the G-15 members wrote:

One side is saying:

Human and democratic rights of citizens should be guaranteed.

As there was in the defense of the sovereignty of our nation, let there be now too broad participation by PFDJ members and the general public in the appraisal and evaluation of past experiences.

Let the PFDJ and the government take concrete measures to implement and guarantee their professed aims of establishing a constitutional government.

Let a constitutional government be established through free and fair elections.

Let differences inside the front and the government be resolved peacefully, democratically and legally.

The other side:

Argues saying our professed goals cannot be implemented now because suitable conditions have not yet been created, and there is the danger of "sub-national sectarianism";

Argues further that we should not have an open discussion, assessment and evaluation because this could lead to a rift between the government and the people, and our enemies may exploit the situation;

Characterizes any criticism as anti-front and anti-unity, and is quick to portray it as, and equalize it with, serving the enemy's agenda.

Closes all legal avenues and forums for dialogue and shelves decisions that should be implemented;

Is delaying the front's congress and national elections to perpetuate the existing order;

Attempts to muzzle any serious views and opposition by instilling fear, and threatening to take illegal and undemocratic action.

That members of both the G-13 and G-15 shared not only certain opinions with one another but also personal relationships and professional commitments as citizens of Eritrea is undeniable. The Chicago resident who had participated in the G-13 and helped compose the Berlin Manifesto explained to me how he and his colleagues in exile were at

least partly inspired by conversations held with the same officials who later authored the Open Letter:

I talked to the people who [later] dissented from within the Central Committee of PFDJ. They were really disgusted at what was going on. We thought we could direct this debate to a more productive course. That was the purpose of the meeting in Berlin. It was not -- Criticizing the government was secondary.

The G-13 therefore acted not only out of their own genuine concern for what was taking place in Eritrea, but also because their intention was to help their like-minded colleagues within the government raise issues for which no effective outlet in Eritrea existed. In the relationship between the G-13 and G-15 incidents, we can detect the same pattern that has characterized much of the Eritrean trans/national movement: the way in which the state sought to block a significant intervention by discrediting the Berlin Manifesto and its authors, and how exile and local actors nonetheless connected with one another as citizens to resist that state. Drawing upon the empowering and more protected location of exile, the G-13 expressed sentiments that their Eritrea-based colleagues could not, despite their own ostensibly powerful positions as longtime leaders in EPLF and high-ranking officials. That the G-15 formed and composed their Open Letter within a year of the Berlin Manifesto's release suggests that these dissenting officials used the momentum created by the G-13's intervention to initiate an even more powerful one of their own. Moreover, although the G-15 acted in their capacity as government officials, they more importantly believed they were fulfilling their duty as patriotic citizens. In both the G-13 and G-15 letters, the language of nationalism and the vitality of the liberation struggle as an historical referent remain, albeit blended with a more modern, internationalist discourse of democracy, constitutionalism, rights, the rule of law, and civil society.

II. ii. Dissent and Punishment: Students, Journalists, and an Anthropologist

In the weeks and months that followed the release of the Open Letter to Members of the PFDJ, an unsettling blend of social unrest and forced calm enveloped Asmara. As Plaut (2002:122) details, the month of June brought inquiries to the Minister of Justice regarding the whereabouts of fifteen missing Eritrean journalists. In July, a group of fifty elders sought to mediate the conflicts within the PFDJ only to have their efforts rejected and several among them arrested. Around the same time, a half-dozen PFDJ officials resigned from their posts, including the ambassadors to Scandinavia, Nigeria, and the European Union, as well as the Consul-General in the Netherlands and a senior official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Asmara.

Meanwhile, a growing independent student movement within the University of Asmara, consciously unaffiliated with NUEYS, began voicing dissent. Semere Kesete, the leader of the movement and a veteran EPLF fighter, was arrested for articulating grievances with the university administration and the government's mandatory summer work programs. Within days, a spontaneous but peaceful demonstration at the courthouse in downtown Asmara resulted in the detention of hundreds of students who had gathered to show their concern. In mid-August, nearly the entire student body was instructed to report to the stadium, where they boarded busses bound for workcamps at Wi'a and Gel'alo, two of the hottest locations in eastern Eritrea. Human rights groups and international observers criticized the government after two students died, ostensibly from heat exhaustion and lack of medical attention. Back in the capital city, parents and grandparents showed humbling courage by agitating on behalf of the students. Attending to some business at the university one morning, I witnessed dozens of elders gathered outside the gates and surrounding the university president as he arrived, pleading with him to bring back their sons and daughters. They were forced back by guards, and later rounded up and held for hours by armed soldiers.

Just one week after the events of September 11 in the United States had captured all the world's attention, eleven members of the G-15 were arrested and detained without charge or access to legal representation. Of the remaining four, three were in the US at the time (where they remain in exile), and one rescinded his membership in the group. Other individuals suspected of sharing sympathies or direct connections with the G-15 were also arrested, all of them in dawn raids on their homes.⁹ At the same time, the government announced the closing of the independent media, including eight private newspapers and the Catholic Church's press, the oldest in Eritrea. Scores of journalists were also arrested and several others fled the country altogether, where they have since launched advocacy campaigns on behalf of their imprisoned colleagues.¹⁰

While the government justified the closing of the presses as a failure to comply with press laws, most people understood it as the PFDJ's attempt to silence both dissent and public debate. The private newspapers had become extremely popular in their capacity as one of the only outlets in Eritrean society for citizens to voice their opinions in a public forum. Moreover, they had been the chief vehicle for disseminating the G-15's Open Letter to members of the PFDJ, had re-printed numerous postings drawn from Eritrean websites, and published interviews with exile intellectuals who spoke critically of the government's handling of the war. In the aftermath of the border war, however, the PFDJ argued that any form of dissent amounted to a national security threat, and extra-judicially accused the G-15 and its supporters, known and unknown, of treason. Reliable information about anything happening in Eritrea became nearly impossible to find as government television, radio, and newspapers consolidated their monopoly on the

⁹ I was shocked to discover, when I turned up for our appointment, that one individual I was to interview about her experiences in EFLNA had been arrested that morning for her suspected connection to the G-15.

¹⁰ Among the arrested was Fissehaye Yohannes, also known as Joshua, a personal friend, veteran EPLF fighter, and co-founder/editor of Setit newspaper. He remains in prison where he has waged a hunger strike. He has since won a prestigious award in journalism, and with his detained colleague has been an important project for Amnesty International and other international and Eritrean human rights and advocacy groups. To date, Eritrea has the highest number of journalists in prison on the African continent.

production and distribution of knowledge. Internet cafes overflowed as urban young people in particular, who despite their fear of spies watching over their shoulders, signed onto Eritrean websites managed by their compatriots in exile and other independent news sources, searching for analyses of their current situation.

As a foreign researcher in Eritrea at the time, it became increasingly difficult for me to conduct interviews and establish trust with citizens and authorities alike. The sense of fear and uncertainty was palpable and all-encompassing. As internal security agents requested repeated (and progressively more hostile) meetings with me, questioned my assistant and close associates, and demanded detailed information about my interview questions and the names of interviewees, I too began feeling the repression sweeping Eritrea in the wake of the war.¹¹ Despite having the necessary clearances to conduct research, I worried constantly about the safety of people who knew me and felt confused about whether or not I myself could be in danger. The paranoia of Eritrean society was contagious and clearly not unfounded.

Yet, amidst all this, friends and acquaintances continued to voice their opinions to me with astonishing openness. From taxicab drivers who offered unsolicited disquisitions on democracy and the abuses of power in Eritrea upon learning I was American, to friends who confessed their heartfelt anguish and disillusionment over the turn of events, to local religious leaders who expressed quiet moral outrage about the repression around them, Eritrean people were demonstrating to me Monga's (1996) assertion that resistance to injustice, patterns of democratic behavior, and forms of civil society in African countries may look different than those of the west, largely because they are being exercised under conditions of authoritarian state repression (see also Comaroff and

¹¹ Although I cooperated in providing certain information about my research design and major questions, I refused to reveal to authorities the identities of private citizens I had interviewed or relate the content of our discussions as per the terms of informed consent procedures. Authorities were unfamiliar with and highly suspicious of these procedures. I became fearful of holding interviews or meeting individuals in public places in the event I was being followed.

Comaroff 1999). Whether in everyday behaviors and small and spontaneous acts of resistance (see Monga 1996; Scott 1985), or in the larger movements emerging in the trans/national social field, I was witnessing Eritreans' attempts to both support their nation-state as well as "manage and steer [the] communal anger" (Monga 1996:149) provoked by the unhappy circumstances overtaking it.

In these moments, I also felt as though I was observing the same shift taking place as that revealed in the Berlin Manifesto and Open Letter, in which Eritreans were acknowledging the ways that official nationalism and the legacy of the revolution had ceased to supply the necessary meanings and practices to sustain the next stage of Eritrea's development as a nation and state. Rather than creating the free and just society it had promised, the post-revolutionary government had instead produced a nation-state deformed by rigid controls on power and the perpetual crisis of war. As Eritreans both at home and abroad expressed their dissatisfaction and anger, they repeatedly deployed a flexible -- if sometimes idealistic -- notion of democracy as the only mechanism for creating a more civil state and inclusive national identity. They also used the language of civil society as a model for exercising the rights and social power ostensibly guaranteed to Eritreans all over the world now that Eritrea had become an internationally recognized nation-state. While ideas and discourses emanating from the west and communicated trans/nationally by exiles have shaped much of these debates, other meanings assigned to these terms are also rooted in Eritrea's history and revolutionary experience.

III. The Search for Democracy and Civil Society at Home and Abroad

III. i. Locating Democracy in Eritrea

While the debate over democracy, civil society, and the state in Africa is not a new one (see Bayart 1993; Gledhill 1994; Harbeson et al 1994; Kasfir 1998; Nyang'oro 1999; Nzongola-Ntalaja and Lee 1998), many scholars are today suggesting that we pay less attention to the definitions of these institutions according to normative, western

formulations and more to the way in which Africans themselves have understood and practiced them in the past and present (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Karlstrom 1996; Kasfir 1998; Monga 1996; Schaffer 1998). In Eritrea, the question of democracy has been on the agenda for a long time, and is understood to have deep roots in traditional practices such as the Peoples' Assembly, or *baito*, where conflicts were resolved in a public manner and justice dispensed accordingly. This traditional form was adopted and revised by the EPLF during the revolutionary years and was later incorporated as an essential component of the post-independence state structure (see Killion 1998:294-5; Pool 2001).

The notion of democracy associated with the post-Enlightenment liberal traditions of western nation-states also took center stage in the political developments of the 1940s. As we saw in chapter one, the years of the British Military Administration (1941-1952) in particular introduced to Eritrea many features of multi-party politics and the foundations for (liberal) civil society institutions. Early nationalist leaders during that era like Woldeab Woldemariam and Ibrahim Sultan devoted much attention to the idea of democracy. In one 1942 article entitled "Democracy and Dictatorship," Woldeab argued that democracy depends upon transparency and accountability in government, lest it devolve into dictatorship (Fessehazion 1999:8). In another article, written in 1948, he thwarted assertions that democracy was only appropriate for "advanced" countries by delving deeply into pre-colonial Eritrean traditions to locate the roots of practices like elected leadership and popular political participation (Ibid.) A decade later, one of the most important claims being made by early nationalists to justify Eritrea's right to self-determination was that the region, unlike the rest of Ethiopia, had already been transformed by these encounters with modern democratic practices.

Throughout the years of the nationalist revolution, the issue of democracy and mass participation also formed an important component in the ideological development of both ELF and EPLF. As we saw in chapter two, a major justification for EPLF's own formation was the alleged lack of democratic decision-making within the early ELF. In its

1977 *National Democratic Program*, the front asserted in no uncertain terms its commitment to elected leadership, constitutionalism, equal rights, and freedoms of speech, press, assembly, worship, and peaceful demonstration. It also supported the organizing of youth, peasants, workers, women, and students into civil associations.¹² At its second Congress in 1987, EPLF made yet a stronger case for its commitment to multi-party politics in the post-independence state.

Throughout the years of the revolution, however, EPLF configured its practice of democratic principles according to those of democratic centralism, a blend of western-style democracy, Marxist-Leninist collective decision-making, and Maoist discipline and absolute respect for authority. Moreover, the configuration of EPLF's nationalism, with its emphasis on the synthesis and homogenization of identities into a common national one complemented its structural emphasis on democratic centralism. Accordingly, unified national subjects would participate in EPLF's efforts to forge true democracy à la Marxist theory, in which state and society merge into an organic whole characterized by solidary interests and a lack of distinction between the political sphere of the state and general public interests (see Bottomore et al 1983:114). These same commitments remain operative today in post-independence Eritrea under PFDJ, which as we have seen in detail, seeks to manage its trans/national society and reproduce national identity according to the same mechanisms employed during the revolution itself. These practices have caused considerable difficulties in the context of the modern nation-state, where the definitions of democracy that Eritreans expect to see instituted by the government are not at all the same as during the revolution.

Even during the years of the revolution, however, EPLF's emphasis on democratic centralism was also contested, especially in the trans/national arena. As we saw in chapter three, EFLNA members broke their association with the EPLF leadership in 1978 because

¹²See Article 1, "Establish a Peoples Democratic State," *National Democratic Program of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front* (1977).

of the anti-democratic and absolutist character it perceived in the front. For these activists, and for others who did not embrace EPLF's nationalist authority, the "centralism" in the front's approach was stifling. Our explorations in chapter three of the range of identities and interests present among EFLNA activists in the US, and the dissonance experienced by many who returned to the field, illustrates this highly contentious and long-debated relationship between democracy, national identity, and authority. It also highlights how these have been bound up with trans/nationally constructed identities and processes since the early 1970s.

III.ii. Democracy, Political Identity, and Reconciliation

Questions related to the meaning and praxis of democracy in Eritrea have also been extremely important to those whose identities were shaped within ELF. As I explored in earlier chapters, ELF's nationalist formulation allowed for more pluralist constructions of the nation and national identity, wherein competing political currents and religious, ethno-regional, kin, and other affective loyalties were not subject to the same homogenizing pressures. While this pluralism frequently led to sectarianism and structural weakness in the front, it also permitted certain claims to a democratic character unique from EPLF's. Although EPLF's formulation appeared more progressive in its forging of commonalty and consistency across broad sectors of Eritrean society, in hindsight members of both fronts recognize that this came at the price of a different kind of repression -- that of nationalist homogenization. In earlier chapters, we heard the voices of both ELF and EPLF supporters who noted the pluralism and democratization of identity more prevalent in ELF during the 1970s.

Today, these claims to democracy are even more urgent among members of both the new reform movement, initiated by the G-13 and G-15 incidents, and the older opposition still aligned with ELF. These movements have charged the PFDJ with losing sight of its vision of a democratic, independent nation-state and devolving to a more

dangerous incarnation of nationalist authoritarianism than during the revolution. For former ELF members and affiliates, moreover, the realities of exile have only exaggerated the importance of concepts like democracy and civil society in the trans/national imagination. Not only have Eritreans in places like the United States been exposed to western democratic traditions by virtue of residence, but they were also encouraged by the EPLF during the liberation war to create linkages to American civil society institutions and exercise their power as US citizens (or residents) by agitating on behalf of Eritrea. At the same time, however, their struggle against the totalizing power of the EPLF as an administrative body heightened their desire to achieve autonomy from the front. Thus, the combination of oppositional political orientation, life in exile, and the trans/national pressures of the EPLF all helped draw the attention of former ELF affiliates to the usefulness of “democracy” as a tool for resistance and the re-imagination of national identity and the nation-state form in Eritrea. In their own claims to power and belonging, former ELF members envision elements of western democracy grafted onto Eritrea as the only way to truly achieve the kind of “unity” Eritreans collectively desire. At the same time, these practices must be consistently applied across both Eritrea and its exile communities if they are to become authentically Eritrean. As Asgedom explained:

I think the only way it will work in Chicago now is if any organization can emerge without restrictions. That is the best way. It's the same thing we are advocating for politics inside Eritrea. It's the same. That's what we are looking for. But in the final analysis, the country has to survive as one nation. It has to be strong. It's the same logic -- if you are advocating for multi-parties in Eritrea, it doesn't mean the country will be run by many parties. It will eventually be run by some sort of entity that represents the nation. But those are social institutions, not the state itself.

In chapter four we saw how the intensive and enduring trans/national presence of the Eritrean state in exile, and the manner in which EPLF/PFDJ has sought to control the activities and identities of exiles (and especially those formerly belonging to ELF) created further fragmentation in communities like Chicago. More recently, these same impulses have led to organized resistance among exiles who refuse the state's trans/national

authority, and like their reformist counterparts, see reclaiming Eritrea from a corrupt regime as their new patriotic duty. Utilizing American democratic traditions like freedom of speech, association, and assembly, exiles have staged demonstrations across the US to draw attention to the anti-democratic nature of the PFDJ in Eritrea and to call for reconciliation between former EPLF and ELF political identities. These acts of resistance are not only justified in terms of defiance against a regime that refuses such freedoms for its people at home, however. They also represent a creative and highly subversive reversal of the trans/national pressure applied by EPLF/PFDJ to have their populations abroad lobby the US government and stage demonstrations on *behalf* of the state's interests. One Internet author on a popular opposition website wrote scathingly about PFDJ's trans/national power and the concomitant need for exile agitation as a catalysts for change in Eritrea, and ultimately, reconciliation between EPLF and ELF:

Eritreans do not need PFDJ's permission to meet. Repeat: Eritreans do not need PFDJ's permission to meet. The PFDJ, which claims a guardian's role for itself in the lives of Eritreans who, according to it, do not have the maturity of children, detests the idea of Eritreans meeting without its knowledge or permission. That's why it calls meetings 'conspiracies,' 'secret cells.' That's why it works so hard to disrupt them. . . . That's why Eritreans should form associations (no matter how modest the agenda or few the membership). This is how the Civil Society is formed. Eventually, there will be natural coalitions and critical mass will be reached to challenge the coercive powers of PFDJ. Eventually, something that is far-fetched now will be a reality in the course of time: a "Parliament in Exile," as suggested by one of Eritrea's former National Assembly members, Herui T. Bairou. Networking includes a recognition of resolution that will establish a healthy respect for reconciliation.¹³

According to this formulation, which bears a definite resemblance to Asgedom's ideas about democratizing the Chicago community, agitation in exile contributes to democratic change and the growth of civil society institutions in Eritrea by putting these into practice within communities that remain trans/nationally bound to Eritrea. The connection between the reconciliation of former ELF and EPLF political identities and democratization in Eritrea is also central to these goals, as former ELF affiliates and those

¹³ "Blueprint for Action," November 5, 2001. www.awate.com

active with the existing opposition movement acknowledge that creating spaces for their political participation in Eritrea depends upon broader recognition of their contributions to the liberation struggle and their non-EPLF identities as authentically Eritrean. Seyoum Ogbamichael, former public relations officer for the ELF-RC based in Germany, commented:

The way out is for the system to move out and open the stage for all the people. All political forces in Eritrea should establish a unity transitional government. This transitional unity government will take our country to democratization. We believe that the transition to democratization is based on national reconciliation. This is the way out. If there should be a workable process of democratization, it should be based on a broad base of reconciliation; if not, it could not be workable and cannot escape the risk of civil war.¹⁴

For those who continue to nurture their distinctive experiences, nationalist orientation, and political identities in relation to ELF, democracy at least partly means that they will be provided (or will claim by force) a genuine role in Eritrea's political and social arena. But it also means an honest revisiting of, and new consensus about, the constitution of national subjectivity. The exclusion felt by many former ELF affiliates from structures of power, the lack of genuine recognition for their contributions to the revolution, and the perceived narrowness of EPLF/PFDJ official definitions of national identity have led many to suggest that ELF's more pluralist construction may offer an alternative (or at least a platform for revision). Speaking in a meeting of the ELF-RC in Chicago, Seyoum Ogbamichael advocated the recognition of different identities within the political landscape, acceptance of opposing viewpoints, tolerance and mutual respect, and building from the common ground shared by all Eritreans as a major objective of the opposition movement.¹⁵ Thus, reconciliation and democratization go beyond objective

¹⁴ "Interview with Seyoum Ogbamichael," June 21, 2001. www.awate.com

¹⁵ It is important to note that these values are more or less also shared by those who are not affiliated with the ELF opposition movement. Many Eritreans who belong to none of the existing political movements have chosen to do so because they are doubtful that none will offer a truly democratic alternative. That part of doing politics includes the manipulation of concepts and terms like "democracy" and "freedom" is undeniable. My analysis of the use and meaning of these among various Eritrean political movements is not an endorsement of their claims to power.

measures taken in the course of governance; they include an expansion of nationalism to accommodate identities and solidarities based upon religious, ethno-regional, kinship, and alternative political sensibilities that have otherwise been repressed by the EPLF/PFDJ. Utilizing the resources, rights, and freedoms of host countries offers opportunities for exiles to not only obtain skills in the practices of democracy, citizenship, and civil society, but also to develop more specific ideas about what these mean for Eritrea and how to implement them trans/nationally.

III. iii. Practicing Democracy, Citizenship, and Constitutionalism

Having established their presence in the United States more than forty years ago, Eritreans have had much occasion to participate in American democratic and civic institutions. In addition to staging demonstrations and experimenting with the mobilization of action groups around specific issues, such as human rights and freedom of information (which will be addressed shortly), Eritreans have been influenced by other kinds of experiences with western democracy and citizenship as well. For some, the ability to participate in elections, to exercise one's free speech, assembly, and religion, and to live within a relatively coherent and predictable socio-political environment has influenced their perspectives and behaviors vis-à-vis Eritrea.

One respondent in Asmara, a Catholic priest, had pastored a Latino immigrant congregation in the US for thirteen years before returning to Eritrea. Part of his work entailed empowering his congregants by encouraging them to become citizens and to vote. To set an example, he himself applied for US citizenship, was sworn in alongside his congregants, and organized trips to the polls during local and national elections. Drawing on the experience of voting as a US citizen, he then described to me how it felt to vote in the Eritrean referendum on independence in 1993:

In 1993, when the referendum was done, even though I wasn't here in Eritrea, it was a particular experience for me, because it was the first time in my life I was able to vote as an Eritrean. Imagine, from 1981 to 1993 I lived in the States, where people really take for

granted the power to vote. For me, what was -- I have no words to express the joy and feeling I had about what many Americans had at their fingertips and some did not even really appreciate. So just to show the contrast -- I was living in a country that is so open democratically, and to have had this experience for the first time. I'm not saying every aspect of America is good, but it was very powerful, and particularly great that day. . . . I would like to have the opportunity to vote as an Eritrean many times. But the process has not gone that way, and it has become harder for me because of that earlier experience. Harder for me than most people here in Eritrea, probably. . . . That kind of experience and being very much involved in the political organization there [in the US] changed me a lot.

Similarly, the ability to predict certain outcomes based upon the "rule of law" also appears important to many Eritreans who use their rights as citizens or residents of western countries to draw attention to the lack thereof in Eritrea. Amid the torrent of articles posted daily on Eritrean websites, one finds frequent references to the freedoms available in the west as compared to those of Eritrea.¹⁶ During a series of demonstrations held by critics of the PFDJ across the globe in 2001 and 2002 protesting the treatment of dissidents, journalists, students, and others, several of the events were reportedly disrupted by Eritreans loyal to PFDJ as they tried to prevent their compatriots from speaking out against the government. In one article, already quoted from earlier in this chapter, the author noted that demonstrators were essentially protected from the repressive behavior of the Eritrean trans/national state by the fact that they were subject only to the laws of the United Kingdom -- and not the PFDJ's -- regarding their right to demonstrate:

Unfortunately for [supporters of PFDJ], the UK actually thinks the rule of law overrides the rule of the mob and the hoodlums [who disrupted the demonstration] will be persecuted [sic]. . . . [Their associates] can all raise funds for them and visit them in jail because, unlike Eritrea, the UK does grant its prisoners visitation rights. . . . Our brothers and sisters in Eritrea live in FEAR but there is absolutely no reason why those of us who reside in nations with rule of law should. Our Eritrean families look to us to speak for them, to articulate their fear, their anger, their helplessness, and we should.¹⁷

¹⁶ It is of interest to note that an informal keyword search on two websites, one known for its oppositional orientation (www.awate.com) and one belonging to the PFDJ government itself (www.shaebia.org) turned up over 2300 references to the word "democracy" on the former and 12 for the latter.

¹⁷ "Blueprint for Action," November 5, 2001. www.awate.com.

During meetings of the newly formed ELF-RC in Chicago, which I attended on several occasions, some concern arose among members of the opposition that PFDJ supporters would also attempt to disrupt their events. While no one turned out in person to do so, a flyer did circulate within the wider community charging the ELF-RC with connections to Osama bin Laden and Islamic terrorist groups (ostensibly because one extremist splinter group of the ELF belongs to the Jihad movement). ELF members were outraged and some even talked about threatening the PFDJ members with lawsuits. When I asked one leader of the group if this could create problems for him if he returned to Eritrea to visit, he responded vehemently that he was an American citizen and would use his rights as an American, including seeking safe haven in the US Embassy in Asmara, if the government threatened him for his political views or activities. For this man, American citizenship afforded him access to rights and legal representation that he could wield against the Eritrean government if necessary.

The idea that a democratic environment -- like those of many host countries in which exiles reside -- guarantees certain basic freedoms and rights according to the rule of law has become increasingly important to Eritreans in recent years. As rights and freedoms grow ever more elusive in Eritrea, people have focused intently upon the Eritrean Constitution as a way to actually begin instituting important changes. One of the most important issues for reformists and oppositionists alike has been the failure of PFDJ to implement the Constitution, despite its ratification in 1997 and the popular democratic practices employed in its drafting. For many, this has been a key signifier of the regime's lack of commitment to models of democracy and civil society in Eritrea that they believe are appropriate to modern nation-states, such as guaranteed constitutional rights and multi-party elections. These models, moreover, have already been grafted onto Eritrea's own realities via the Constitution itself, which drew upon those of other nation-states around the world (including the US's) for structure and inspiration. The failure of the PFDJ government to implement the Constitution therefore suggests that regime is in fact

opposed to the rights and freedoms contained within it. Dr. Bereket Habte-Selassie, one of Eritrea's most eminent public figures and chairman of the Constitutional Commission, thus wrote on a popular Eritrean website:

The expectation of the Eritrean public was that the Constitution would come into effect immediately after its ratification. That it did not come into effect, in addition to the government's silence on its fate after its ratification, is a matter that has occasioned a great deal of public questioning and anger. And until recently the government of the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the successor of the EPLF, maintained a Sphinx-like silence until it was finally pressured to promise that elections would be held, on the basis of the Constitution, at the end of 2001.¹⁸ The Constitution was brought into being with so much care and concern that the very process of its making raised great expectations among the Eritrean public. Thus, the government's silence on the fate of the Constitution compounded the problem, raising doubts about its true intentions.¹⁹

Moreover, the issue of elections evoked yet further questions about what this key component of "democracy" would mean unless coupled with a sincere consideration of multi-partyism and important political developments taking place in exile, many of which appeared to be both a product and a cause of the government's reticence to implement the Constitution:

Who will participate in such an election? Will the field be open only to the PFDJ, as some diehard cadres would have it, or will it be open to other parties? If the former, where is the reform? If the latter, how will that come about and who will be the likely opposition parties that would contest the election? . . . Some Eritreans, including the present writer, expected the EPLF to permit the formation of multi-parties after independence. The fact that this did not happen has given ground for exiled opposition groups, most of them former ELF cadres, to charge the PFDJ leadership with being obsessed with the monopoly of power.²⁰

In addition to issues like electoral politics, constitutionalism, and ELF-EPLF reconciliation as important features in a democratic Eritrea, the issue of what constitutes a "citizen," and how citizens should behave, is also very important. We have seen some examples already of how the G-13 and G-15 expressed their criticisms of the Eritrean

¹⁸ The planned December 2001 elections were later postponed indefinitely due to the border war with Ethiopia.

¹⁹ Bereket Habte-Selassie, "The Disappearance of the Constitution and Its Impact on Current Politics in Eritrea." January 20, 2001. www.news.asmarino.com.

²⁰ Ibid.

government in terms of their duties as patriotic citizens. We have also seen how those participating in public demonstrations, or in American voting procedures, consciously recognize the way they were exercising the rights associated with citizenship in the US and what this meant for them as part of the Eritrean nation-state. Common to all of these cases is the idea that citizenship affords individuals and groups certain claims to empowerment within a given state and the ability to criticize or mobilize against its government (or, conversely, on its behalf).

However, the model of citizenship that the Eritrean one-party state has put into practice since independence is based almost solely on the definitions of nationalist subjectivity developed by EPLF during the revolution. According to that formulation, proper national subjects were those who identified first and foremost as Eritrean rather than as members of ethno-regional, religious, or kin groups. They were also highly obedient to the structures of authority created and deployed by EPLF as a liberation front, and were expected to make enormous sacrifices on behalf of the nation. Today, these same definitions of the proper subject have been transposed to the proper citizen, who largely exists to support and serve the state. Mandatory government programs such as National Service, or the summer work programs for high school and college students, illustrate the way in which the state defines Eritrean citizenship in terms of the responsibility individuals bear to the state, rather than in terms of the state's responsibility to serve its citizens. Similarly, the repressive measures taken against those who criticize or resist the state's demands reveal how strongly the state insists upon its own definitions of citizenship while rejecting the idea of the "social contract" central to western democratic traditions.

Resistance to the state's definitions in Eritrea and exile, however, show that ideas about belonging, rights, and responsibility that are proper to a nationalist revolution are neither adequate nor satisfactory for an independent nation-state. The state's taxation of Eritreans in exile, upon whom it levies an annual 2% tax, has caused outcry among those

who have come to value the notion that representation and other rights should accompany taxation. Again, drawing upon their experiences as citizens of western countries, exiles in particular have begun mobilizing around the idea that citizenship entails at least the right, if not the duty, to criticize one's government. As a young Chicago resident named Dawit put it,

A lot of things have to be done. . . . [The government's] gotta be open to the public, people gotta, see, hear, listen, and know about it. They might not be exposed to a whole lot of politics, but they have common sense and an idea of what's good for the country. Just because people aren't intellectual doesn't mean they're dumb. They do know and understand what's good for the country and what's not good for the country. So it should be open to discussion. Then people can criticize if they need to criticize the government. Being a leader, you need to be criticized, you need to be pushed around. That's how it should be. Not just sitting and doing whatever you want to do, and whatever you do the people have to take it. You should do for the people, not the people should do for you.

Dawit's perspective is attuned to those aspects of citizenship that entail participation in politics and government accountability to citizens. This same idea is echoed by an anonymous writer on an Eritrean website, who pushes this logic one step further to suggest that citizens bear an additional complementary responsibility to voicing criticism; that is, if citizens do not exercise their right or duty to speak up, then they actually forfeit their own claims to empowerment and democratic representation:

If we are serious about constitutionalism and democracy, then we have to start exercising our responsibility as citizens and take a government to task when it is violating its bond with the citizens. Governments -- all governments -- should be rewarded and punished for how well they live up to their contracts with the citizens. They shouldn't be allowed to milk the goodwill of the citizens indefinitely. This is what a nation should expect from its citizens --- particularly its youth and students. If we fail to do this, then the government has every right to say, 'the people are not ready for democracy.'²¹

Whether or not the concept of citizenship being invoked by many Eritreans as they struggle with the state's authority is based upon actually existing conditions in their countries of residence, or upon a more idealistic formulation belonging to the realm of normative political theory, is certainly debatable. The point, however, is that changing

²¹ "Misplaced Loyalty," November 19, 2001. www.awate.com.

constructions of citizenship with which Eritreans engage as members of host societies, or more broadly as members of a global order, are being brought to bear upon a state which continues to insist upon nationalist formulae increasingly at odds with the expectations of its population both at home and abroad.

III.iv. Democracy and Trans/National Dissonance

The claim that Eritrea has learned from the experiences (and errors) of other nation-states and governments, both in Africa and internationally, has been an important component of the PFDJ government's nationalist narrative. Whether or not this claim is based on any objective fact, or can be measured as such, is another matter. Concerning the trans/national debate over the meaning of democracy and the nation-state in Eritrea, however, the issue of "local" definitions specific to Eritrean culture and history versus those that are based upon 18th and 19th century Europe (or more contemporary models associated with globalization), has been a major dimension of the struggle between the nationalist PFDJ and its dispersed constituents. This dilemma is by no means unique to Eritrea: the question of shaping post-colonial African nation-states according to western formulations (or not) has been among the most pressing concerns for Africans and for scholars of Africa since decolonization (see Laakso and Olukoshi 1996; Mamdani 1996).

As we have seen, Eritreans at home and abroad have co-constructed national identity and the nation-state since the inception of the independence struggle. Today they are doing the same with concepts like democracy, civil society, constitutionalism, and citizenship. In all cases, this process has been characterized by contradictions, power struggles, and both failed and successful interpenetrations. The tension between "trans" as an international or global signifier and "national" as one of local Eritrean specificities, while productive in certain ways, also generates such dissonance as to render elusive a consensual definition of democracy's meaning and praxis in Eritrea to this point.

According to the PFDJ's official position, Eritrea is in fact on the long and uneven path to democratization. However, given the history of sectarianism within both traditional society and the nationalist movement itself, the trauma of the border war, and ongoing threats from "external enemies" like Ethiopia, the PFDJ believes that the country must proceed slowly towards democratic institution-building. Moving away from an earlier emphasis on "participatory democracy," the PFDJ has come to favor the notion of "guided democracy," wherein through the course of economic development and social stabilization directed by the government, Eritreans will become more capable of sustaining the multiple pressures that democratic practices inevitably exert. The clamoring for more rapid progress among many Eritreans, and especially those in exile, has caused consternation among leaders who insist that Eritrea's present and future cannot be dictated by forms or concepts not firmly grounded in local experience.

Among Eritreans at home and abroad who support the PFDJ, the kinds of engagements with democracy that exiles have introduced appear disingenuous at best and threatening at worst. One female official who lived for several years in the US herself discussed how recent objections to the PFDJ's repression of the private Eritrean press raised by exiles in the US actually reveals a poor understanding of both the American and Eritrean contexts. She commented:

The value of the democratic discussions they want to have -- it doesn't have any depth. They say, 'In America you would say this, in America you would do that,' but they don't have the ability to really *see* things. I remember telling my cousin the other day that in America, when it come to the press, they have this national security thing, so you have to know what you are going to write in your newspapers. America wouldn't play around with national security. But he didn't understand, because he's not the type of person who has the capability to really have vision, to know what I mean by national security.

Similarly, many Eritreans in Chicago who continued to support the PFDJ during the time I conducted fieldwork felt that exiles should not primarily concern themselves with political participation in Eritrea. Rather, their role should be one of economic and technical support in development efforts, which over time would help contribute to the

conditions necessary for an effective democratic society.²² One active leading member of the PFDJ party in Chicago argued passionately,

The issue is not democracy. The issue is survival. Basic living. You cannot discuss things like this with the diaspora. They only see things in their own environment. To them, how many political parties? To me, it's not the parties. In every house, most of the mothers, three, four, or five of their children are at the war front. They don't know when their children are coming back. Reintegration is the most important factor, the basic living is the most important factor, and we go from there. It is a process. Then we can move into the implementation of other things. . . . The people, many of them can't even write. They don't discuss things based on issues -- they only discuss politics in terms of the revolution or religion or regionalism. I myself, I would call it a democracy when they can read the paper, sign the paper, and identify their leaders. Timing is crucial. Am I going to [institute democracy] right now because I am threatened by some group in Germany or the diaspora? Or wait and finish the infrastructure?

A close colleague of his in the PFDJ party in Chicago also noted, somewhat contradictorily:

First, we have to look at ourselves. What can we really contribute to the country? I mean, we don't live the day to day life of the people in Eritrea. We are living in a different country, a different society. And we are also challenged by the day to day life of where we live. So we shouldn't have a say. We should have only a minimal say of what goes on in Eritrea. . . . We cannot decide the fate of the Eritrean people because we don't live their life -- we can only support them. If I'm not mistaken, Eritreans are the only people from the African continent who are actively involved in the political life of their country. We were involved in the creation of the Constitution. The committee came here and we voiced our opinions like everyone else, we argued. . . . I think the government of Eritrea relies heavily on the diaspora. Not only in economic terms, but in big political decisions. We were involved in the referendum, we voted. . . . But we cannot govern the Eritrean people from the US. We have to live there.

According to this perspective, which reflects that of the PFDJ generally and betrays the particular ambivalence the state feels towards its exiles, Eritrean society simply cannot sustain the introduction of democratic institutions or multiple political parties at a time when the country has been weakened economically and is still recovering from both the border war and the 30-year independence struggle. Only when important

²² The democracy-development question is a chicken-egg issue that is likely unresolvable. Eritreans who advocate immediate democratization argue that exiles who pay taxes and make other financial and technical contributions should have the right to make demands upon an accountable government. Those who advocate development as the main priority argue that if people are not physically present to build Eritrea, the least they can do is make financial and technical contributions while trusting the government to know what is best for the country.

strides towards reconstruction and development have been achieved can such things as political parties, elections, free press, and other associated practices be instituted safely. Moreover, the kind of democracy that will emerge in Eritrea is unlikely to duplicate all of the features common in western nation-states like the US. And while the one-party state quite clearly needs its exiles, allowing them to participate too freely may damage Eritrean society by allowing them to impose “foreign” ideas or structures that are inappropriate to Eritrean realities.

Few, if any Eritreans who advocate democratization, however, would argue that western institutions or practices should be imposed on Eritrea. Indeed, many are quite critical of how democracy has been practiced, and its meanings manipulated, in western countries like the US. They are also acutely aware of the contradiction presented by Eritreans who live in the US and enjoy its freedoms, and yet refuse to advocate the same in Eritrea due to a narrow nationalist perspective. According to one incisive interviewee in Chicago who defines himself as a patriot rather than a nationalist:

I can't deny it. I live in this society and am pretty much influenced by the democratic institutions, the practices, that go on in here. But I do not subscribe to the mainstream views of what democracy is. I was involved with African-American movements, the Civil Rights movement. . . . We understand the issues of minorities here, of oppressed groups. We understand discrimination, because we've lived it. So it's not by normal American standards of democracy -- it has faults and limitations. We are not trying to duplicate it, to just take it and put it into Eritrean society. We know what influences our way of thinking. Most Eritreans here have liberal social views. But when it comes to Eritrean society, they seem to deny that right for the people who speak out, to have a democratic society. It's very hard to tell how sincere they are when you talk to them about democratic principles and so on, because when it comes to Eritrea they seem to feel like, well, we don't want to do this, the country is going to go to chaos, our unity, our stability. People say, 'oh, democracy can wait.' That makes me furious! I say, why do you live in this country then? If you believe in those rights for yourself, why are you denying your own people the right of liberty, and to have legal, social, and civil rights?

Considerable dilemmas have arisen for Eritreans as the many different meanings assigned to democracy and other accompanying features like constitutionalism and citizenship have collided within the trans/national social field. Some of these meanings are embedded within Eritrean history and experience, while others emanate from specific

western traditions or from more general global trends wherein terms like “democracy” and “civil society” are constructed as ideal features of contemporary nation-states. Most importantly, however, the task of defining and applying democracy in Eritrea is not simply about the particular realities with which Eritreans contend, such as the legacy of ELF-EPLF political identities, a history of sectarian struggle, a growing and restive exile population, and the existence of identifiable democratic impulses within traditional Eritrean culture. More than any of this, it is about the challenges facing a marginalized nation-state as important global pressures -- many of them embodied by its own population -- push it inexorably beyond the limits of revolutionary nationalist discourse and praxis and closer towards the hegemonic political and cultural models of nation-statehood and governance in the contemporary world. We now turn our attention to a discussion of these global pressures vis-à-vis Eritrean trans/national civil society.

IV. Trans/National Civil Society

IV.i. Civil Society, Modernity, Globalization

While the notion of civil society does not possess so long a history among Eritreans as that of democracy, the concept in and of itself has been a subject of considerable interest in the west since classical and medieval times (Ehrenberg 1999). It has become a particularly dominant category of political thought since the birth of the modern nation-state and has undergone several revivals around the world as new states have formed or experienced major political and social transitions. This was particularly the case in the 1980s, when Eastern European countries were experimenting with social movements and democratization efforts under “actually existing socialism” (Cohen and Arato 1992; Ehrenberg 1999). In these modern manifestations, the concept of civil society has been closely linked to democracy; indeed, it has been viewed as the driving force behind democratization everywhere, including post-colonial Africa (Mamdani 1996:14). However, like democracy, civil society has seen a broad and changeable usage which has

varied across places and time periods, rendering it at least as polysemous as democracy and perhaps even more nebulous in its definition.

Once thought to belong exclusively to the western Enlightenment project and to liberal political traditions of industrializing, capitalist states, the notion of civil society has since become a highly pliable one that actors across a variety of historical and social milieus have found “especially ‘good to think,’ and signify with, at moments when the conventional connections between the political and the social, state and public, are perceived to be unraveling” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:12). Accordingly, the concept has captured the attention and imaginations of scholars and actors enmeshed in studies of and conditions of globalization, wherein parts of the world once thought to be removed from the kinds of histories and traditions out of which civil society first emerged have now staked claim on it as a useful concept and model for socio-political action. Indeed, one important aspect of globalization (whose roots can be traced clearly to western imperial expansion and colonialism since the 1700s) has been the export of ideas and structures associated with the western nation-state form and its standards for governance and socio-political empowerment. Among Africans and Africanists seeking to forge and interpret the modern nation-state form in Africa, the concept of civil society has been tackled from a variety of perspectives and disciplines (see for example Bingen et al 2000; Caaghy et al 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Gledhill 1994; Guyer 1994; Harber et al 1994; Hepner 2003b; Kasfir et al 1998; Mamdani 1996; Monga 1996; Nyang’oro 1999).

While different orientations in political theory and social science have produced unique definitions, the most common characterization of civil society is that of an intermediate, semi-public sphere between family and the state, comprised of differentiated institutions like schools, religious bodies, trade unions, nongovernmental organizations, voluntary associations, and ad-hoc social movements. In more liberal, normative political thought, civil society was thought to comprise a “third realm” distinct

from both the state apparatus and the economic sphere, that exerted a democratizing force vis-à-vis the often antagonistic state (see Cohen and Arato 1992). In contrast, the Marxist tradition construed civil society as a sphere of largely unregulated human needs and desires that required the state to direct and control it (Bottomore et al 1983; Cohen and Arato 1992; Ehrenberg 1999).

To be sure, much of the contemporary debate about civil society has focused on what it is and how to measure it, rather than the historical or cultural specificities surrounding its articulation and efficacy, or the substantive meanings and practices assigned to it by actors (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Kasfir 1998; Mamdani 1996; Monga 1996). A major critique among Africans and Africanists, then, has been that the concept's formulation in both liberal and Marxist political theory is unable to analyze civil society according to its actual manifestations or meanings in African societies. In many treatments of civil society in Africa to date, African nation-states were said to either lack civil society institutions altogether or to possess a deformed version of a western standard.

More recently, however, as anthropologists and others interested in the meaning of civil society to non-western societies have entered the debate, elements of liberal and Marxist political theory have proven useful as interpretive tools. In particular, ideas derived from the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971) have demonstrated their versatility across a variety of culturally disparate milieus. Gramsci developed a conception of civil society and its relationship to the state that is flexible and highly nuanced in its ability to understand political, cultural, and historical phenomena as mutually constituted. Drawing upon Hegel, Gramsci viewed civil society as the semi-private (or semi-public) “ethical root of the state” (Bobbio 1987:150), where both hegemony and popular consent were produced.²³ The legacy of Gramsci's analysis for social science has been an

²³ In Gramsci's formulation, hegemony refers to the process by which state apparatuses and political society (parties, etc.) are able to “coerce” society into accepting the status quo through the shaping forces

understanding of the ongoing dialectical engagement between state and society, where each penetrate the other and the distinctions between them are sometimes blurred (Bottomore et al 1983: 73). More specifically for anthropology, Gramsci's conception of civil society has been useful because it focuses on how the state-society relationship is founded as much, or more, in ideological and cultural relations as it is in material ones (Bobbio 1987:148). This approach broadens civil society's interpretive scope beyond Marxist analyses of class conflict to include issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and other aspects of identity and social differentiation as central to society's relationship with political-economy and the state (see Hall 1996; Holub 1992; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Marshall 1994). Moreover, Gramsci's ability to account for power as a relation, one that pervades society but is not possessed or deployed equally among differentiated groups, has influenced scores of later theorists interested in social inequality, social movements, nationalism, and the state (see Holub 1992:92).

Gramsci's legacy has also been very important to contemporary scholars interested in the resurgence of civil society discourse and praxis in non-western contexts, and more broadly, under conditions of globalization that foster the exportation and local adaptation of western models for nation-state relations. African countries and populations are no exception: the global resurgence of civil society as fertile category for thought and action (Burawoy 2001; Casanova 2001; Kaldor 1999) has also influenced the African imagination in definitive ways (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). As in the popularity of

exerted by institutions like schools, the media, law and policy, law enforcement and discipline, the military, and prisons. However, because these are *social* institutions and not necessarily part of the state apparatus itself, they are also locations where counter-hegemony, or resistance, can take root. Thus, it is within civil society where the state reproduces the conditions for its own power, as well as sows the seeds for its opposition. As most anyone familiar with certain postmodernist trends in social theory (including poststructuralism and cultural studies) will note, this approach has influenced some major theorists and their contributions to social science. These include Michel Foucault's notions of power and discipline (1977, 1980), Raymond Williams' conception of "the structure of feeling" (1977), Pierre Bourdieu's habitus, doxa, and heterodoxy (1977, 1980) Stuart Hall's ideas about race, class, and ethnicity (1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1996), Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1984), and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's seminal poststructuralist text *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985).

democracy as a concept, this fixation on civil society is related to the way in which the nation-state form has been constructed around the world as the most “natural” unit of human and social organization in the world today (Gledhill 1994; Glick-Schiller 1999; Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001; Herzfeld 1997; Malkki 1995b; Nagengast 1994) and the associated political patterns that accompany the post-Cold War world after the decline of socialism. Similarly, the growing interest in the state as a subject of ethnographic inquiry (Gledhill 2000; Greenhouse et al 2002; Scott 1998) has resulted in a renewed focus on how and why concepts like democracy and civil society are being culturally reconstituted across the globe.

However, as numerous scholars have pointed out over the past decade, globalization has also transformed many patterns long associated with the territorial nation-state form. Previously aligned categories like national identification, state sovereignty and administrative authority, citizenship, political participation, national economies, and cultural boundedness have all shifted under conditions of globalization. These conditions include extensive international migration, the spread of multi-national capital, flexible labor markets, and communication technologies like the Internet. The appearance of “deterritorialized nation-states” (Basch et al 1994), or states from whom their nations have been decoupled and then regrouped according to new cross-border practices by social actors and governments alike, is also a major feature of globalization. As Casanova (2001:423) has put it:

Globalization is. . .continuous with the world system of states, but it alters radically that system by dissociating the elements which were clustered together within the nation-state: administrative territorial state, political society or body of citizens, market economy, civil society, and nation, all embedded territorially within a system governed by the principle of undivided and exclusive sovereignty. Globalization limits and relativizes state sovereignty; frees capitalist market and civil society from its territorial-juridical embeddedness in state and nation; and as a result dissolves the particular fusion of nation and state which emerged out of Western modernity and became institutionalized worldwide, at least as a model, after the French Revolution. Globalization does not mean the end of states or the end of nations and nationalism, but it means the end of their fusion in the sovereign territorial nation-state.

It is this last point which remains of particular importance for Eritreans and for other populations who remain bound by nationalist ideologies or other dramatic commitments to the territorial nation-state, and yet also participate in discourses and practices that challenge or explode the previously taken-for-granted homologies upon which modernity -- and ideologies like nationalism -- rest (see Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001). Because of this tension between hallmarks of modernity and those of globalization, the re-evaluation of formerly “stable” components of social and political organization has become extremely pressing.

It is within this context that a resurgence of civil society discourse and associated practices has taken place among scholars and actors alike. One example is the notion of “global civil society,” which has achieved popularity as researchers develop tools for understanding the emergence of human and moral communities or movements that transcend national identities and territorial nation-states to appeal to common concerns of social justice, ecological sustainability, and human, economic, and social rights (see Kaldor et al 2003; Keane 2003; Walzer 1997). As a concept, global civil society refers to the way in which people across varied national and juridical contexts unite in discernible ways to press particular entities (including states and international bodies) into policies and practices that address the common dilemmas of large groups of concerned citizens. These dilemmas typically transcend the nation-state itself to include issues of global scope and importance, such as the spread of HIV/AIDS, terrorism, war, corporate responsibility, environmental degradation/sustainability, and international criminal courts, among others. At their core, the objectives of global civil society tend to be a decrease in violence, enhanced democratization on terms of power-sharing and decision-making, and an emphasis on the well-being of humanity regardless of national or state affiliation. The phenomenon of global civil society, moreover, has only been augmented by the

heightened mobility of people (whether voluntary or forced) and the resulting multiple subjectivities individuals form as members of more than one nation-state.

More than any other body of literature, contemporary studies of transnational movements, processes, and identities highlight all of these issues simultaneously, whether in relation to specific nation-states or clusters of several at once. Additionally, they provide valuable ethnographic insight into the unevenness of globalization as a process, one which is “produced and consumed not in thin air, not in some virtual reality, but in real organizations, institutions, communities” (Burawoy 2001:148), and often with contradictory effects. Thus, studies of transnational processes and identities remain ultimately concerned with the consequences of globalization for specific populations or locations, although few have yet employed the notions of civil society or global civil society in their analyses. It is a central argument of this dissertation that a conception of transnational (or trans/national) civil society -- one which draws upon concerns similar to those articulated by global civil society but exclusively in reference to circumscribed national objectives -- contributes to a more critical, nuanced, and dialectical understanding of the dilemmas facing nationalist states as they relate to their increasingly transnationalizing societies under conditions of globalization.

IV.ii. Trans/National Civil Society in Eritrea and Exile

Having established to this point the form, character, and consequences of Eritrean trans/nationalism for both the Eritrean nation-state and Eritrean communities in exile, as well as the various contexts in which recent debates around democracy, citizenship, and civil society have taken place, it is important to further focus and ground what I have referred to as Eritrean trans/national civil society throughout this study.

In regards to current debates concerning the role of civil society in contemporary postcolonial Africa, it seems that the most important task has not been ascertaining whether civil society exists in Eritrea, but rather to understand how the concept is

currently being understood and applied by Eritreans themselves vis-à-vis both the nationalist state and the trans/national social field binding them together. Similarly, keeping the Gramscian legacy in mind, we must necessarily recognize how existing trans/national social institutions such as mass organizations or unions, religious bodies, community associations, NGOs, and other organizations founded on political or rights-based platforms have been major locations for the production of EPLF/PFDJ nationalist hegemony, state power, popular consent, and also active resistance and alternative identities. Moreover, it is equally pressing to see how the interpenetrations between state and society, Eritrea and exile, have been characterized by unevenness, contradiction, and oftentimes state repression. In this respect, the trans/national political struggle is also a cultural struggle: the Eritrean state deploys its power and nationalist ideology to block exile interventions that it fears may make Eritrea more vulnerable to global political-economic and cultural pressures that compromise its sovereignty and authenticity as a new and marginalized nation-state, while exile populations bring to bear their broader engagements with the west upon their relationship with Eritrea as they envision the nation-state achieving a respectable place in a world system where democracy and rights are constructed as the norm. Previous chapters have documented ethnographically and historically both the unfolding of these trans/national struggles and the components of the trans/national social field that together constitute what I now refer to as trans/national civil society.

Analyzing the role and efficacy of civil society institutions in contemporary Eritrea is both more and less clear than it appears. More clear, because many of these -- mass organizations and religious bodies in particular -- have significant roots in Eritrean society that either pre-date the nationalist movement or have been integral to the mobilization and popular participation of large numbers of citizens. Less clear, because the ability of these institutions to provide genuinely autonomous spaces of socio-political action has been compromised by the historical, socio-political, and cultural developments

surrounding the nationalist struggle and birth of the state. While the ambiguity and even incipience of civil society in Eritrea is undeniable, it is also potentially empowering, however. As I have already pointed out, the trans/national constitution of Eritrean society creates unanticipated and often unregulatable spaces for intervention beyond the purview of the state (see Hepner 2003b; see also Guarnizo and Smith 1998:9)), rendering reconfigurations of power and identity possible even under conditions of local repression and state authoritarianism.

In Chapter Five, I explored ethnographically the way in which community associations, unions, religious bodies, NGOs, kinship networks, and the Internet all represent modes of mutual intervention for exiles and the Eritrean nation-state. Each of these are somewhat unique in their degrees of relative autonomy from the state and susceptibility to its interventions, as well as their potential to offer avenues of resistance to official nationalism and totalizing state power, as we have seen. Those which were largely embedded within the revolutionary struggle itself, such as NUEW and NUEYS, tend to be most subject to the state and hence the least autonomous from it. While NUEW and NUEYS may have declared themselves civil society institutions after independence (Connell 1997; 2001), we have seen how they remain closely linked to the PFDJ and beholden to its nationalist agendas, even as they seek to integrate exiles into local society. One Eritrean commentator wrote on a website to this effect:

Let's bring the case of The Civil Society to Eritrea. There are all sorts of associations--youth, women, workers, and journalists in Eritrea. But they all have one thing in common: they are owned and operated by the PFDJ/GoE.²⁴ Their agenda cannot be divergent from that outlined by the GoE; its leadership cannot come from anywhere but the GoE. They meet when the GoE wants them to; they disband when the GoE tells them to; they go to the streets to protest when they are told to; they keep quiet when they are told to. Let's take the case of the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS). . . . Now, how civil -- how independent -- is the youth society going to be given that a member of the ruling government chairs it? Doesn't that make the association just another branch, another tentacle of the Octopus known as PFDJ? What happens when

²⁴ GoE is an acronym for Government of Eritrea.

there is a conflict between the interests of the members of the youth association and the government? What happens if a group of Youth & Students decides that they don't want to be members of NUEYS and would like to form a competing group?²⁵

Similarly, as we have also seen, NGOs like Haben and the Eritrean Development Foundation, which are themselves the product of trans/national interventions by exiles, have also been heavily regulated by the one-party state's policies and guidelines for NGO activity. While some forces within local Eritrean society have challenged this power structure, such as the formation (and subsequent crushing) of an independent student union unaffiliated with NUEYS, for the most part these trans/national avenues have remained beholden to the state's authority.

Rather more autonomous have been religious institutions in Eritrea, which as we have also seen in earlier chapters, tend to be the most efficacious structures for both community solidarity in exile (Hepner 2003b) and independent social action vis-à-vis the state. Aside from the kinds of international relationships in which most churches are inherently embedded, religious leaders of various denominations in Eritrea have been among the most courageous and outspoken annotators of the state's policies and praxis, especially since the border war with Ethiopia. Eritrean and Ethiopian Orthodox patriarchs, Catholic Bishops, Imams, and Protestant ministers convened in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Sweden, and Norway as one of the only homegrown coalitions to openly address the consequences of the border war and advocate reconciliation between the two countries. The Eritrean Catholic Bishops' 2001 Pastoral Letter raised important critiques of the PFDJ regime that no other organized body in Eritrea had dared -- or been able -- to do to that point. And during the years following independence, new Pentecostal or charismatic churches experienced dramatic growth as individuals and families in Eritrea sought explanations for the hardships they suffered that nationalism had ceased to supply, and as exiles searched for modes of solidarity apart from the troubled constructions

²⁵ "Government and Civil Society," by Saleh AA Younis. September 27, 2000. www.asmarino.com.

offered by existing political definitions. And while the state also cracked down on these institutions, banning worship at “new” churches such as Pentecostal and Seventh-day Adventist in 2002 and silencing the Catholic Bishops for their 2001 Pastoral Letter, religious bodies nonetheless represented some of the most important outlets for practices and identities that resisted the state’s hegemonic and homogenizing power. This has also been the case with the Internet, which has facilitated the formation of important trans/national relationships, introduced perspectives into local Eritrean society the government cannot control, and enabled the mobilization of new Eritrean movements across multiple exile locations.

Indeed, the Internet sustains a proliferating array of groups that have organized around the world on the basis of platforms like democracy, civil society, human rights, and reconciliation. These coalitions and associations, some of which claim tax-exempt status, are structurally nourished by the political configurations and discourses of their societies of residence and have adopted very clearly the forms of self-presentation that are culturally and socio-politically appropriate for western, democratic societies as they pursue their own agendas for transformation within the Eritrean trans/national nation-state. In the past three years, emergent civic groups include the International Network of Eritrean Civic Societies, an umbrella organization comprised of the Eritrean Association for Peace and Democracy-Sweden, Eritreans for Human and Democratic Rights-UK, Coordination Committee of Eritrean Democrats in Italy, Eritrean League for National Reconciliation-Sweden, Eritrean Human Rights Association-Sweden, Eritreans for Peace and Democracy-Switzerland, Popular Movement for Democracy in Eritrea -Sweden, and Eritrean Free Discussion in Baden/Wurtemberg-Germany. Other recently formed associations include Eritreans for Justice and Democracy-Benelux, Union for Eritrean Cultural Association-Sweden; Movement for Democratic Change-Sweden; Eritrean Human Rights Advocacy Group-USA, Eritrean Independent Democratic Movement-USA, Eritrean Journalists in Exile, and the Eritrean Public Forum. The very

appearance of all of these within a short period of time, and the kinds of platforms around which they have organized themselves, clearly points up the way in which global constructions of democracy, civil society, and human rights have impacted exiles' perspectives on independent Eritrea and their own historical experiences within the liberation struggle.

In addition to these civic coalitions and associations, all of which now agitate against the exclusivist, militarized nationalism associated with the state under PFDJ, numerous political parties have also emerged in exile. The most important of these has been the Eritrean National Alliance (ENA), formerly known as the Alliance of Eritrean National Forces (AENF), which includes many different groups that splintered from ELF following its exile from Eritrea in 1981-1982. With participating affiliates throughout exile locations around the world, the ENA is largely headquartered in Ethiopia, where it has received some support from Eritrea's most significant "other," much to the chagrin of the Eritrean government. Other parties include the reformist Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front-Democratic Party (EPLF-DP), which was founded by the former Minister of Defense for PFDJ and member of the G-15, Mesfin Hagos; the Eritrean National Party (HEWAR), and the Eritrean Federal Democratic Movement (EFDM). All of these parties have formed in exile and retain their leadership and membership bases abroad, but are also developing platforms of political contestation in Eritrea itself, including clandestine organizing among local Eritrean citizens.

Because the PFDJ banned the formation of other political parties in 2002, all of these contenders have utilized the spaces of exile and certain components of the trans/national social field itself, particularly the Internet and micro-networks of kin and friends, as methods for mobilization within Eritrea. Drawing upon ideas associated with democracy and civil society, such as constitutionalism, freedom of association, freedom of information, and multi-partyism, these groups contest the revolutionary nationalist conflation between the party and the state currently embodied by the Eritrean status quo.

Moreover, their resistance to the state's demands that official EPLF/PFDJ nationalism remain the sole means through which one can secure political belonging and claim whatever citizenship rights the state concedes is predicated on the historic grievances former ELF affiliates have harbored since the 1980s.

Thus, while the enduring existence of the sovereign state remains a common interest for all Eritreans regardless of political affiliation, the definitions of sovereignty that are exclusively based upon EPLF/PFDJ nationalism are seriously contested. The state's concomitant rejection of "foreign" impulses introduced by both exiles and the larger global pressures inevitably exerted on Eritrea as a nation-state are likewise related to its own recognition that contemporary trans/national calls for democracy and civil society among exiles are linked to historic conflicts between ELF and EPLF political identities and the tension between ideal national unity and actually existing pluralism (and potential sectarianism) present within Eritrean society. As we have also seen, however, these debates about democracy and social power within a trans/national context have long been a feature of Eritrean political culture, at least since the 1970s when groups like EFLNA challenged EPLF's authority, and well into the 1980s and 1990s as exile communities resisted the state's efforts to organize their identities and activities in diaspora.

Reflecting upon what we have observed in terms of the local-exile composition of Eritrean trans/national civil society and the interpenetrations between the two, it is clear that the Eritrean state and its dispersed society have intervened in one another's activities in order to either consolidate the existing power arrangement or to attempt to change it. The components of the trans/national social field I have examined in this dissertation, from mass organizations like EFLNA, NUEW and NUEYS, to NGOs, religious organizations, family networks, and the Internet, have been central to both the state's efforts as well as those of Eritrean citizens. And while these institutions have been important mechanisms for the state's enduring power and nationalist hegemony, they

have also constituted a “third sector” where demands for an expansion of “the spaces of political participation. . . in the political and social life of the country of origin” (Itzigsohn 2000:1141) have taken place. At once “able to monitor and influence the activities of the state and private sector” (Itzigsohn 2000:1136), this third sector is also a highly differentiated and unevenly developed arena, partially forged by the revolution and also continually growing and complexifying. This uneven institutionalization of the trans/national social field (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999; Itzigsohn et al 1999) has created significant gaps in the otherwise totalizing presence of the state and enabled Eritreans in exile to conjoin with those at home in efforts to challenge the EPLF/PFDJ’s authority and definitions for citizenship and national belonging. Thus, it is partly because of this unevenness, as well as the greater autonomy enjoyed by exile communities and movements, that local and exile aspects of civil society are able to connect with one another in the shadow of a vigilant trans/national state.

As we have also seen throughout this chapter, Eritreans have been as subject to the pressures of globalization as any other population, including the increasingly dominant cultural constructions of how “democratic” nation-states should look and act. However, these pressures also include the forced migration of more than one-quarter of the country’s population and the increasing power of the state to monitor and control its citizens at home and abroad. Within such a context, where the Eritrean nation-state must negotiate its place in a world system of nation-states, trans/nationalism has been both exceptionally useful as well as highly unpredictable. While the state has long manipulated its linkages to its populations abroad in order to achieve both sovereignty and its own nationalist objectives, its citizenry has drawn upon the realities of exile and the opportunities available in the west to press for models of statehood and civic engagement that radically challenge the revolutionary nationalist logic of the state. Indeed, Eritreans at home and abroad now find themselves situated within an emergent global civil society that advocates for an expansion of democracy, the rule of law, and social justice

irrespective of nation-state borders and identities, and also embedded within the contested history and contemporary rigors of the nationalist project. As a result, they have forged a middle ground between these two contradictory impulses, one in which locally-grounded movements and discourses within the territorial nation-state are linked to those originating out of both the Eritrean exile experience and the wider, international community in which Eritreans reside. This middle ground, which utilizes the third sector of the trans/national social field to forge and sustain its relationship with Eritrea, is what I mean by trans/national civil society.

Conceptualizing the contemporary relationship between Eritrea and exile as one of trans/national civil society not only helps us come to terms with the dialectical and often contradictory pressures that characterize the Eritrean trans/national social field. It also allows us to examine how the construction of political ideals like democracy, constitutionalism, civil society, and even nationalism are, in effect, cultural processes rooted in the different historical and socio-political contexts of revolutionary Eritrea and twenty-first century America as they conjoin under conditions of globalization. On the one hand, the Eritrean state's emphasis on maintaining an exclusivist nationalist approach to nation- and state-building represents an agenda for resistance against the forces of globalization that marginalize and threaten the sovereignty of small, new, and poor countries (see Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001:30). On the other, however, the dogged insistence upon a particular synthetic nationalist approach embedded within such a conflicted history of struggle has alienated significant portions of the population and led many in exile to draw upon internationalist models of governance and citizenship as they stake their claims upon Eritrea via the trans/national social field.

In all of these ways, the long-brewing debate about democracy in Eritrea, from the 1940s to the present, has expressed the particular dilemmas facing emergent nation-states in a world where state borders and national identities are the most important they have ever been, and at the same time emblematic of an older order whose time may have come

and gone. Again, the words of Eritrean Internet commentator Saleh Younis seem to capture particularly well the essence of the Eritrean situation. Drawing upon both Alexis de Toqueville's observations about the "chaos" of early American democracy as well as the condition of modern African states, he writes:

With the exception of South Africa -- which produced Nelson Mandela -- there hasn't been a single African country (sub-Saharan or otherwise) that has managed to produce a civilian leader from within the Civil Society. The dearth of civil society in Africa is one of the most bemoaned diagnoses of What Ails Africa. African Governments argue that the pre-requisites of democracy include a vibrant civil society but then go out of their way to discourage, dismantle and destroy budding civil society. They accuse them of promoting narrow and parochial interests as if that is not the goal of civil societies to begin with. . . . Eritreans are ready, deserving and capable of having a vibrant civil society. The only institution telling us that we are not ready is the government. The government has a vested interest in telling us so for two reasons: (1) civil society is capable of producing civil disobedience and, in extreme cases, anarchy. But since the right of association is as "inalienable" as the right to liberty, all suppression does is drive associations to operate underground which, as the Eritrean revolution shows, is more dangerous than open and free associations; (2) civil society is a direct threat to a government's ability to monopolize ideas and to be the sole legal guardian of our values and priorities. The civilian is seen as "gebar"--literally, a tax payer--and the government takes on the role of the cradle to grave nanny. The net effect of this is that people develop a strong dependency on the government and are incapable of taking the initiative to face their own challenges. The government reinforces this by constantly telling the people that any association of people that is not subservient to the government are not to be trusted. In a thousand and one ways, the message is the same: what would you do without me?²⁶

V. Concluding Remarks

Eritrea and exile remain a single, yet differentiated entity, bound together within a trans/national social field that simultaneously maintains the power of the Eritrean state and its nationalist project and enables the communication of ideas and practices associated with global citizenship and the expansion of rights, freedoms, and government accountability. As participants in a trans/national civil society, Eritreans as active agents have responded to their societies of settlement and yet have remained citizens and subjects of Eritrea. Conceptualizing the relationship between Eritrea and exile as one of

²⁶ "Government and Civil Society," Saleh AA Younis, September 27, 2000. www.asmarino.com

trans/national civil society, moreover, sharpens our understanding of how migrating subjects relate to their multiple nation-states in transnational contexts, and what the consequences have been for communities, nations, states, and the world as a whole. Finally, through a case study of Eritrea, we come to understand the particular challenges faced by emergent and marginalized nationalist states in a world characterized by global political constructs like democracy and civil society. While many of the global pressures exerted on Eritrea relate to even larger structural forces such as geopolitical dynamics and the global restructuring of states and economies, the focus in this study has been on the cultural processes involved in the transterritorialization of political movements like nationalism and democratization.

At once caught within the Eritrean state's web of authority and yet also seeking to reterritorialize in places like the United States, Eritreans occupy a "third sector" (Itzigsohn 2000) or "third time-space" (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996:13) that is neither Eritrea nor America, and yet unmistakably part of both. In wrestling with concepts like democracy and civil society, Eritreans have adapted the experience of exile and brought it to bear upon local Eritrean realities, envisioning a reworking of both nationalist identity and state power in such a way as to render more "civil" the heretofore militarized and often repressive status quo. Challenging the hegemony of the Eritrean state across borders, Eritreans abroad and those at home have discovered avenues for intervention, resistance, and empowerment in the interstices of the trans/national social field binding them together. Despite the state's omnipresence, Eritreans all over the world are participating in networks, flows of information, interest groups, and internationalist discourses about the configuration of power that the state itself can neither control nor completely block from entering Eritrean society. Within communities like Chicago, Eritreans struggle with one another to achieve new consensus about nationalism and their social, cultural, and political participation in both American and Eritrean society. In all of their contention, they support the existence of a sovereign Eritrean state materially

and ideologically, even if they cannot agree upon how power should be configured and how citizens and national subjects should behave. They represent the greatest source of strength and legitimacy for the Eritrean nation-state, and yet the greatest challenge to its status quo. Through their universal commitments to ideals articulated on a global scale and their very particular concerns for Eritrea, they are both internationalists and nationalists. They live within Eritrea and America, and yet belong to neither. They are a trans/national civil society, born of Eritrea and raised in exile.



Conclusion

I. Eritrea and the Global Context

This dissertation has explored how the nation-state of Eritrea was literally built upon trans/national process beginning as early as the inception of the nationalist movement for independence in the 1940s. It has also detailed the outcomes and inherent contradictions of this for individuals, families, communities, the nation, and the state. But despite this significant history of entanglement between Eritrea and exile, the story is in many ways only just beginning. As the Eritrean state seeks to institutionalize the kinds of linkages with its diasporic citizenry that will enhance its own nationalist pursuits from the top down, that same citizenry has proven equally committed to an effervescent “transnationalism from below” (Smith and Guarnizo 1998). The resultant middle ground is a social field riddled with dialectical tensions: localism and globalism, nationalism and internationalism, coercion and consent, emancipation and constraint. Drawing upon the practical actions and discursive constructions of the Eritrean nation-state and its exiles, I have articulated elements of this social field as comprising a trans/national civil society.

But clearly the situation facing Eritrea and exile is about much more than the dynamics of nationalism, revolution, war, and forced migration in the Horn of Africa. It is also about the positioning of Eritrea as a geopolitical entity within the African continent, and beyond that, the rest of the world. In this regard, “globalization” goes beyond trans/national processes and identities to include strategic political alignments and realignments, imperial interests past and present, and the restructuring of states, societies, and national economies. Thus, the Eritrean struggle for independence was situated within the political alignments of the Cold War and other regional dynamics related to the country’s proximity to the Arab world, while the recent Ethio-Eritrean border war and its attempted resolutions were enmeshed within the policies of the African Union, the United

Nations, and other foreign governments with real or potential interests in the Horn of Africa's strategic location. Independent Eritrea, moreover, must as a nation-state contend with the dilemmas of neo-liberal political-economic agendas, such as those embedded in structural adjustment programs and foreign aid and development efforts.

A detailed analysis of these structural forces is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the international global context in which Eritrea is located remains important nonetheless. That Eritrea has emerged a new, small, and resource-poor nationalist state during the era of globalization, wherein "sovereignty" is relative and large sectors of economically-productive populations have been displaced from their territories of origin, is both significant and exciting for what we can learn from its experience. In many ways, and true to the pragmatism of its nationalists, Eritrea has made good use of the world in which it was born; it has contended with the outmigration of its people, advances in technology and communications, and the decoupling of nation and state in such a way as to strengthen its own goals and to resist certain external forces encroaching upon it, including structural adjustment plans and the compromising agendas of foreign agencies or governments.

However, because it is also situated in a world where the models for legitimate nation-state behavior no longer possess much capacity for revolutionary socialism of any variety but rather favor -- at least discursively and superficially -- constructions like democracy and civil society, the Eritrean nation-state finds itself increasingly unable to wield an exclusivist nationalism to empower itself or secure its sovereignty vis-à-vis other nation-states or forces belonging to the larger global system. While this is partly due to internal features of Eritrean history and nationalism that render the state's project forever contested and incomplete among its own people, it is also due to the fact that Eritrea has emerged from the bunkers of revolution and now must negotiate a place for itself in a wider global order. And just as its people in exile were instrumental for the

success of nationalism, they are also instrumental in adapting ideas and practices associated with democracy and civil society to Eritrean culture, society, and politics.

Thus, the Eritrean diasporic search for democracy and civil society is linked to the overall crisis of the nation-state in the contemporary period, and of African states in particular, many of which have witnessed a dramatic erosion of rights and freedoms in recent years. Eritreans are part of a global search for new anchoring values through which to make sense of their own national challenges and the wider world to which their state belongs. This study has explored the way in which these processes are as much about culture, history, and identity as they are about the macro-structures and political developments in which peoples and nation-states are inevitably situated.

II. Looking Forward

Our collective understanding of the Eritrean case and the larger contexts in which it is situated remains, after all, incipient. Perhaps more than any answers it provides, the questions raised by this study are even more significant and pressing. Having established an understanding of how the nationalist revolution has shaped Eritrean society, exile communities, and the trans/national social field connecting these together, the task now facing scholars (including myself) becomes even more challenging.

The next phase in a research project such as this would necessarily be twofold. First, we must generate more comparative cases across cultural contexts by conducting further research in Eritrean exile communities in North America, Europe, Australia, and/or the Middle East. Only after exploring the dynamics in these places and each region's relationship with the deterritorialized state can we fully appreciate both the shape and scope of Eritrean trans/nationalism, and the implications of debates about such things as democracy and civil society. For clearly, if political notions are constructed culturally across space and time, then the findings in this study are necessarily reflecting the American context at least as much, if not more, than a wider "global" one. Only by taking

this study around the globe will we truly be able to discern what elements emerge from Eritrean history and nationalism, which ones from societies of settlement, and which from the forces we attribute to “globalization.” For in the end the binding together of Eritrea and exile does not just entail Eritrea and the United States. It also includes every national and cultural context in which Eritrean exiles reside, from Sudan, Egypt and Yemen to Sweden, Italy, and New Zealand. A genuine understanding of what “Eritrea and exile” means must necessarily move far beyond the United States to account for these other components of the trans/national social field.

In addition to comparative cases related to Eritrea and its multiple diasporas, we must also introduce into our analysis the experiences of other post-revolutionary and post-colonial nations that have instituted the political participation of exiles. Judging by a cursory glance, we can observe potentially interesting comparisons between Eritrea and countries like Israel, Haiti, and even South Africa in terms of the way in which the nation-state has incorporated or sought to block the interventions of its people abroad. Seeking the commonalities and differences between Eritrea and other cases will necessarily provide a larger context for the specific issues explored in this study.

Finally, we must shift the scale of our structural analysis to more rigorously address what is meant by “globalization” vis-à-vis Eritrea, and beyond that, what globalization as a force means for small and marginal nation-states more generally. While I have attempted in this dissertation to move towards such a goal, I have nonetheless foregrounded Eritrea itself and perhaps the more cultural, as opposed to political-economic, dimensions of Eritrean exiles’ trans/national engagements with democracy, civil society, and the state. A truly holistic account, however, would integrate the macro-structural forces and neo-liberal political-economic agendas acting upon Eritrea with the micro-structural ones I have addressed in this dissertation. Such an approach will move us further away from the exceptionalism that characterizes both

Eritrean studies and the Eritrean nationalist imagination, and ultimately allow all of us who share stakes in the country's future to see its past, present, and future more clearly.

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APPENDIX A

The Berlin Manifesto

Berlin, October 3, 2000

H.E. Isaias Afwerki
President of the State of Eritrea
Asmara, ERITREA

Dear Mr. President:

We, the undersigned, Eritrean academics and professionals, concerned with the predicament facing our country, have agreed to meet in order to make a sober appraisal of our country's current problems and to suggest appropriate solutions. Fully cognizant of your role in leading our nation to independence and mindful of your continued importance as a national leader, we decided to address this letter for your consideration and action.

Your comrades-in-arms trusted you as their leader during the liberation struggle. Your assumption of the office of President is a function of that trust. That trust and the responsibilities that it implies have never been more important than at this crucial moment of our history. We, as concerned Eritreans, also feel the weight of this responsibility. It is for this reason that we have come together to voice our concerns, and to exchange views and ideas which we submit as follows.

We would like to begin by expressing our unreserved support for our government in its defense of our country's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and our admiration for the Eritrean defense forces and the entire Eritrean population for their role in foiling the Ethiopian aggression. But it is our firm belief that the military threat posed by Ethiopia cannot be dealt with separately from the political and economic challenges that confront us as a new nation. We are aware that the great promise of peaceful reconstruction and development has been shelved by considerations of national survival. However, we are also convinced that we can meet the present danger and future challenges if we unite our efforts and correct our past mistakes. The current crisis presents an opportunity to those ends.

I. A Hard-Won Independence Was Nearly Lost

Mr. President, The experience of the last two years has been particularly painful but enlightening. As a nation we have been devastated by the Ethiopian invasion of our sovereign land. Indeed, the wound inflicted upon us by this war has been a chastening experience. Destroying towns and driving thousands of innocent citizens from their homes and even to foreign lands, the Ethiopian army's deep penetration inside Eritrea and

our sudden retreats shocked every Eritrean to the core and shook our nation to its very foundation. The very independence and sovereignty for which Eritreans paid with their lives and limbs was put at risk. We believe, had it not been for the resistance waged by our heroic defense forces and the unflinching support of our people, Eritrea would have almost been destroyed..

How did this come to pass? What are the causes of this tragic war? Why and how did the Ethiopians manage to penetrate deep into Eritrean territory with such speed and devastating effect? This war has not only cost us dear in life, property and in the suffering of our people. It has also raised grave questions about the conduct of Eritrean affairs both domestic and foreign, and about the nature and style of our leadership in the post-independence period.

Mr. President, To ask why we have come to this impasse to inquire into what went wrong and to reflect upon the cause and conduct of the war, and whether it might have been avoided, is not only legitimate, but it is also the duty of every citizen. We hope that the Eritrean leadership, in its recent meetings, has done some soul searching and endeavored to provide satisfactory answers to these questions. We, on our part, took it upon ourselves, as concerned citizens who made modest contributions to our national struggle, to express our views on our nation's current predicament and to offer some proposals as remedies. We hope and trust that you will consider these views in the spirit in which they are given, i.e., on the strength of our patriotic duties and our peoples proud tradition of love of truth and respect for the opinion of others.

The initial impulse that brought us together is manifold. First and foremost, it is the humanitarian crisis facing our people as a result of the war with Ethiopia. But we would be remiss, as concerned citizens, were we to ignore the other burning issues exposed by the current crisis facing our nation --political, social, and economic, as well as crisis in leadership.

II. Humanitarian Crisis and Eritrea's Image

On the humanitarian question, we express deep concern for the tragic conditions of Eritrean victims of war. We are particularly concerned with the plight of the hundreds of thousands of Eritreans who have been affected by the war and the over 75,000 compatriots who were expelled from Ethiopia, and our citizens who are in refugee camps in the Sudan as well as those still languishing in Ethiopian jails and concentration camps. While we appreciate the Eritrean government's principled stand on the issue of deportation, we hope and trust that any deportation that may take place in Eritrea, if necessary and legitimate, would adhere to international law, and be in accordance with the previous practice of the Eritrean government.

We support the Eritrean National Assembly's recent resolution condemning the criminal acts of the Ethiopian government, and we condemn the many egregious acts of violence, vandalism, rape and theft that have been perpetrated, and are being perpetrated, by agents

of the said government against innocent Eritreans. In this respect, we pledge to commit our intellectual and financial resources in the ongoing effort to mobilize support. We trust the government to facilitate the timely delivery of humanitarian aid to our people in this time of need and we call upon every citizen to lend a helping hand in this effort.

Turning to another issue of concern, i.e., Eritrea's image, we wish to assure you, on the basis of close observation, that Eritrea's image has never been as bad as it is today. Indeed, it has hit rock bottom. There should be no illusions about this. Despite our belief in the rightness of our position, much of the world community, including our fellow Africans, perceive the Eritrean government and its leadership as aggressive and irresponsible. Eritrea's leadership has been cast, particularly since the start of the war with Ethiopia, as contemptuous of international law and accepted norms of behavior.

Although Eritrea's worsening image may have been affected by these charges, it is also true that we have alienated our friends and allies, including those who stood by us during the liberation struggle. Even the commendable policy of self-reliance, which many applauded, has now been portrayed as an aspect of arrogance. In our view, the problem is not the policy but its implementation. We know that there is a lot of room for improvement in the matter of implementing policies and in the manner of handling representatives of foreign bodies. Hence, there needs to be a critical reappraisal of policy and praxis.

III. The War and Critical Issues it Brought to Light.

We have followed with great interest and anxiety the unfolding of events since the outbreak of the war with Ethiopia. This tragic war has induced in us a need for critical review of the post-independence developments in Eritrea and particularly in our government's performance. We recognize the fact that there are notable achievements in the fields of infrastructure, education, and social services. However, we have also noted developments that cause us considerable uneasiness and serious concerns about the future of our country.

Despite these disquieting developments, we remained remarkably silent. The reason for our silence was not due to apathy or lack of interest but rather due to the pervasive phenomenon of self-censorship. This self-censorship was particularly acute during the last two years because we all felt that criticism would give aid and comfort to the enemy who might distort it to suit its purposes. Now it is time to speak and speak plainly. Further silence can only endanger the interest of the country as well as compromise our historic responsibility. We must now say that, in our considered opinion, the government has lagged behind in the development of democratic institutions, including mechanisms for ensuring accountability and transparency. We respectfully submit that this is the most important matter for you to ponder and face squarely in whatever reappraisal of government policy and practice you may be undertaking, as we hope you are.

IV. Reconciliation and National Unity

We are convinced that we reflect a widely held view among Eritreans that there should be national reconciliation. Eritrean military victory and the assumption of sovereign nationhood should have been accompanied by a spirit of reconciliation fired by magnanimity -- the same magnanimity shown towards Ethiopians. Wisdom and statesmanship required a call for reconciliation extended to all Eritreans irrespective of belief or political affiliation to join hands in rebuilding a shattered society and economy. It is an opportunity that was lost but that can still be reclaimed. The EPLF (PFDJ) leadership should be willing now to provide political space for groups or individuals. The absence of such space has severely affected the development of civil society and has fostered a feeling of alienation among segments of our society. The constitution, about which we shall say more below, requires such space in no uncertain terms.

V. Collective Leadership and Popular Participation

Mr. President, Considering the practice of the EPLF during the armed struggle, we believe that one of the grave mistakes that the government has made has been the abandonment of collective leadership. You do not need us to tell you that the practice had created trust and mutual confidence among the leadership and between the leadership and the rank and file. The heroic struggle of Eritrean fighters, their tenacity and resilience in the face of overwhelming odds, would not have been successful without such trust and confidence and the collective leadership based on it.

After independence this practice was abandoned and replaced by one-man leadership. It is also distressing to learn that individuals who were part of the leadership during the struggle have been inexplicably sidelined, in some cases with a loss of their use in this crucial time of crisis. This is inexcusable, and whatever the explanation for this negative development, we feel that it must be rectified. No individual leader, however gifted, can be a substitute for values that come with collective reflection and action in national affairs. The advent of one-man dominance has had the effect of suffocating a variety of ideas from blossoming and denied meaningful popular participation. It has inevitably prevented the growth of democratic institutions. A new nation with very limited and under-developed resources facing enormous challenges in all fields, political, security, economic, social, cannot afford to have a government that depends only on one person.

In fairness, the blame must also be shared by other members of the leadership to the extent that they did not object to the negative practices. They may have put up some feeble complaints, but we have heard of no such protests. So, they too have failed the nation along with you in allowing power to be concentrated in the hands of one man. The absence of any record of protest is also a function of the absence of freedom of expression which has prevented the citizens from exercising their rightful duty of restraining the undue accumulation of power in the presidency. Thus it is no exaggeration to say that, despite some notable progress to its name, the government has failed the nation in some important respect.

VI. Crisis within the Leadership

Mr. President, It is not a secret that there is a serious contradiction and a major rift among the leadership. We cannot over-emphasize our apprehension of what may ensue. We deem it to be too serious and dangerous to be handled in a confrontational manner. Hence, we appeal to you and the rest of the leadership to handle it carefully, and to resolve all future conflicts within the framework envisaged by the constitution. Any further delay in resolving the crisis within the leadership will have grave consequences for our nation. We cannot minimize the potential weakness that this crisis may create if not handled properly, considering the opportunity that it can give the enemy to exploit our internal contradictions.

VII. The Role of PFDJ in Politics and the Economy

Mr. President, We are particularly concerned about the parallel institutions of the PFDJ and the government. We see lack of clarity in functions. We see duplication and a bewildering variety of tasks and actors. We feel this involves confusion and waste of resources which a small nation with scarce resources can ill afford.

We would like to see a clear definition of what the PFDJ is. We would also like to see it confined to party activities and refrain from activities that are the proper province of government. The PFDJ's economic activities are a cause for concern and an abuse of the goodwill and trust of the people. While it cannot be denied that PFDJ/government business activities have solved many problems by providing timely and affordable commodities to our people, this cannot be said anymore. In point of fact, PFDJ/government economic activities are contrary to the government's policy of "a dynamic, private sector-led . . . market economy.. .and a commitment to private sector development..." More to the point, PFDJ companies have no clear mechanism of accountability and transparency. At least, there is none that is known to the public. We believe that this is a recipe for disaster and for fostering corruption, cronyism, and favoritism. This climate discourages genuine and credible investors. We strongly believe that the current business practices of the PFDJ will act as a corrosive agent of the political, social, and economic life of the nation, in any case, and in view of the record of the PFDJ, it is important to seriously reassess the whole question of a party running business.

VIII. Implementation of the Constitution

Eritrea has a constitution -- the most sacred document of the nation. This constitution represents the consummation of the Eritrean struggle which was fought for self-determination, democracy, social justice and the rule of law. It was crafted with the participation of the people and was ratified by their representatives. It is the people's document and no one has the right to suspend it or otherwise tamper with it. You were right when you said in your recent interview that the time for the implementation of the

constitution was yesterday. [*Iwanu ttnallyu neiru.*] We agree, but we say: better late than never. The constitution must be implemented immediately. A ratified constitution means that it is already in effect and that the Eritrean people should be enjoying their constitutional rights. We are dismayed to witness the operation of institutions that are clearly and flagrantly in violation of the spirit and letter of the constitution. We are astounded to hear of practices that are contrary to the provisions of the constitution continue today. We, therefore, solemnly request that you take the necessary steps to ensure the full and immediate implementation of our constitution.

As a sign of goodwill and seriousness of intent, again, we would like you to abolish the special court which is undermining the rule of law and creating disaffection among a segment of our population. People have been languishing in jail for many years without being formally charged of any crime, let alone sentenced. They have been waiting to appear before the special court. This stands in stark opposition to the letter and spirit of the constitution and is an affront to elementary notions of justice. We urge you to set these people free immediately or have them brought before a court of law.

Another disturbing practice that is contrary to the spirit of the rule of law is the resort to arbitrary practices of freezing civil servants in what is popularly known as *midiskal*. This harsh and unfair practice, presumably intended to instill fear, seems to have been self-defeating. If the intent was to correct or rehabilitate the victim, or otherwise bring something good to government or the nation, it has not had that effect. The overall effect of the practice has been disillusionment, confusion and waste of valuable resources.

Conclusion

Mr. President, Eritrea is at a crossroad. A portion of our land is under foreign occupation. A significant proportion of our population is displaced. It is time for a serious soul searching by all concerned, starting from the leadership. Let the leadership and the entire nation conduct an open debate. People should not be denied this right which they have paid for with their blood, sweat and tears. We urge you most sincerely to seize this moment of crisis and turn it into an opportunity to reclaim your hard-earned reputation as a leader. You owe it to yourself and to the nation and to wonderful people that has followed you through thick and thin.

On our side, we will spare no effort to help secure Eritrea's territorial integrity and national sovereignty. At the same time, we will endeavor to promote a culture of openness, tolerance, accountability and rule of law. To these ends, we intend to broaden our base by convening a larger meeting which will consider your response to this letter. The idea is to begin and institutionalize a government/civil society dialogue on a continuing basis as a critical part of a healthy development of our future.

Respectfully Yours,

1. Araya Debessay



2. Assefaw Tekeste
3. Bereket Habte Selassie
4. Dawit Mesfin
5. Haile Debas
6. Kassahun Checole
7. Kaled A. Beshir
8. Lula Ghebreyesus
9. Miriam M. Omar
10. Mohamed Kheir Omar
11. Mussie Misghina
12. Paulos Tesfagiorgis
13. Reesom Haile

APPENDIX B

Open Letter to Members of the PFDJ



Introduction

This letter is a call for correction, a call for peaceful and democratic dialogue, a call for strengthening and consolidation, a call for unity, a call for the rule of law and for justice, through peaceful and legal ways and means.

For some time now, regular meetings [of the Central Council and the National Council] have not been held. Believing that the best way to resolve problems is through meetings and democratic dialogue, we requested twice through signed letters that President Isaias Afewerki, as chairman of the Central Council [of PFDJ] and the National Council [of the state], convene meetings of both bodies, but he twice failed to respond positively to our requests. Those of us who made these requests have, as responsible members of both bodies, now chosen to write this open letter to all members of the PFDJ.

Most of us have spent more than a quarter century in the struggle for independence, and many of us have at different times served our country at high levels of responsibility. We have witnessed and taken part in the bitter struggle of our people for liberation, and are now serving the Front, the State and the people as members of the Central Council (the legislative body of PFDJ) and the National Council (the legislative body of the State).

It is obvious that our country is in a crisis. This crisis is the result of the weaknesses of the PFDJ and the Government, and the invasion of our country by the enemy.

Our aim is to find remedies for the weaknesses of the PFDJ and the government so that people participate in discussions and decisions of important national issues to enable Eritrea to come out of this crisis, to pave the road for peaceful, legal and democratic transition to a truly constitutional government, and to establish guarantees for Eritrea to become a peaceful and stable nation where democracy, justice and prosperity shall prevail.

In the Eritrean reality, guaranteeing and consolidating internal democracy within the PFDJ is essential to ensure a democratic process of transition and the establishment of a democratic constitutional government; and our aim and message is this, and only this.

I. Experience of Eritrean People's Liberation Front

Before Liberation (1970-1991)

1. Background

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), in its experiences from 1961 until 1969, was unable or unwilling to:

- Establish a clear national program,

- Form an effective strategy for liberation,
- Ensure and protect the human and democratic rights, unity and cohesiveness of the people and its army,
- Tolerate differences of views, and
- Adopt a participatory approach in the execution of its programs.

This created an internal crisis within the ELF.

As democratic resolution of the problem was denied, the EPLF was formed as a democratic alternative in order to confront the challenge effectively and to establish a free and democratic Eritrea through the consummation of a national democratic revolution.

2. Preliminary stage (1970-1976)

For those forces who later formed the EPLF, this was a stage of rejecting the negative experiences of the ELF, identifying weaknesses in their internal unity and in their capacity to effectively defend themselves in the civil war, and the promotion of the principles of democratic dialogue and peaceful resolution for secondary contradictions.

The doctrine that "the Eritrean field could not tolerate more one liberation front" was defeated. The bitterness of the civil war and the losses and setbacks it caused created a suitable environment for nationalist and democratic principles and practice, and led to the weakening of sub-national ideas and groupings, as well as undemocratic and corrupt practices.

Although the road to such an outcome was not always smooth and flawless, it led to the creation of the EPLF which in its congress in early 1977, came out with a clear political program, established strict laws to guide its practice, declared a strategy of people's war, i.e. liberating the land and the people step by step, introduced transparency and accountability appropriate to the stage of the liberation struggle.

3. EPLF until liberation (1977-1991)

- From 1977 until the liberation of Eritrea (1991), although it can not be said that the EPLF was perfect in its leadership and its organization of the people, or that its internal democracy equally satisfied all its members, not only its legislative and executive organs, but also its institutions which were governed by the conditions of the war were, in accordance with the constitution, transparent and accountable, and relatively satisfied the expectations of most members and the people.
- Even if there were some problems and certain people were occasionally mistreated mainly due to lack of proper management, the majority of the members of the front:



- Believed that they played a part and contributed in all aspects of the struggle;
 - Had unity of purpose and action that astonished friend and foe alike;
 - Accepted organizational decisions and regulations not as edicts and decrees from higher authority, but as their own decisions, which they executed with dedication;
 - Had strong ties and unshakable faith in each other and the various levels of their leadership;
 - Held meetings (admittedly not regular always and at all levels) to identify deficiencies and take corrective action, built on strengths, and used criticism and self-criticism as well as objective periodic evaluations;
 - Strengthened the struggle by keeping secrets from the enemy while obtaining secrets from the enemy;
 - Respected and cared for not only each other but also the people, listened to people's problems and tirelessly worked to solve them; and
 - Above all else, were confident and ready for the highest sacrifice.
- Although not completely successful, the EPLF made an effort to work together with other liberation forces to achieve unity. At its Second and Unity Congress in 1987, it formed a broad national democratic front and decided that it will form a multi-party democracy in independent Eritrea.
 - In order to defeat the colonizer, the EPLF made optimum use of its human, financial and material resources. It made accurate and objective assessments of itself and the enemy. It reinforced its strengths and corrected its weaknesses, while exploiting the enemy's weaknesses and trying to weaken enemy strengths. It did this without boasting and shouting, preserving its resources, and taking considered decisions of when to attack, when to defend, and if necessary, when to retreat.
 - While no one denies that there were problems in organizing and mobilizing people inside and outside, there is no doubt that the EPLF:
 - Raised resoundingly the voice of Eritrean revolution around the world;
 - Reflected the Eritrean people's desire and longing for independence;
 - Raised expectations for a democratic Eritrea.

Until independence, the people had absolute confidence in the EPLF, EPLF members trusted their leaders, and the leaders equally put excessive trust in the General Secretary. All activities were based on trust and more or less family type style of work. Beginning the late 80's, however, absolute trust and the uncontrolled family type of work started to cause problems.

4. EPLF later PFDJ: After Liberation

A. Before Referendum (1991-1993)

- From the time of liberation until Eritrea was declared a sovereign nation through the referendum, the EPLF had recognized itself as the Provisional (Interim) Government without making any changes, and ruled Eritrea as such. If it had any difference with the pre independence phase, it is only that during this time, the concentration was on setting up government departments, implementing emergency rehabilitation and resettlement programs and preparing for the referendum.
- Although it was understandable that problems associated with transition would arise during the two-year interim period, no attention was given to handling veterans and the disabled, mass organizations and the people in general. Although problems and complaints were there, they were simply ignored and brushed aside as "results of loss of direction" instead of being handled seriously.

B. After Referendum (1994-2001)

1. Regarding the PFDJ

1.1. Its goals and plans

In its third congress held from 10-16 February 1994, the EPLF changed its name to Peoples Front For Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), and to reflect the new era, revised its programs and constitution and established a new national charter and a transitional constitution with the following tenets:

Vision: The establishment of a peaceful, just, democratic and prosperous Eritrea.

Vision goals: To ensure national harmony, political democracy, economic and social progress, social justice, cultural revival, regional and international cooperation and stability.

Principles: To be governed by national unity, active popular participation, the decisive role of man, social justice, self reliance, strong link between the leadership and the people

Core political program: To establish a democratic, constitutional political order that allowed pluralism.



Important issues discussed or decisions taken at different meetings of the Central Council of the PFDJ included the following:

- At the second session of the Central Council (28-02-94), a proposal was presented for the Council to work through committees and to establish internal rules and regulations.
- At the third (26-08-94) and fourth (14-08-95) sessions, it was decided:
 - To identify and separate government assets and PFDJ assets;
 - That PFDJ businesses work strictly obeying the trade law and the laws of the market, and aim at helping the disadvantaged in our society;
 - To establish a trust (Hidri) to administer PFDJ businesses.
- At the fifth (25-03-96) and sixth (22-04-97) sessions, it was decided to postpone the holding of the fourth party congress until the first half of 1998, and a preparatory committee was formed.
- At the eighth (29-01-00) and ninth (02-09-00) sessions, the following decisions were made after thorough discussion of the issues:
 - To form a body to study the structure and method of work of the government and the PFDJ;
 - Meetings of legislative and executive bodies to be held at regular intervals;
 - To immediately commence preparation necessary for the implementation of the constitution and to work in accordance with legal procedures;
 - To accelerate resolution of issues of land allocation;
 - To regulate and improve the salaries of military personnel;
 - That people's complaints should be heard and resolved;
 - Government media should be effective and invite wide participation;
 - PFDJ organization must allow wide participation as before;
 - Internal democracy in the PFDJ must be ensured;



- To form a committee that would review in detail the conduct of the war with the Woyane as well as the peace process, and to advise the President on the same in the future;
- To form a committee to study policies, decision making processes, method of work, distribution of authority, and accountability and control in the PFDJ and the government;
- To form a committee to investigate allegations of violation of the rights of a Central committee member.

In addition, it was decided that the fourth congress be held within six months (i.e. by 02.03.2001), and preliminary preparations were discussed.

1.2 What happened after all these decisions?

- Until now, the Central Council has neither internal rules and regulations nor committees to facilitate its work.
- Regular meetings of the Executive Committee (scheduled to be held monthly) and Central Council (scheduled to be held every four months) of the PFDJ have not been held. Since 1994, the Executive Committee should have met 84 times; instead, it met only 11 times. 73 meetings (i.e. 86.9%), which should have been held, were never convened! In the three years of the war with the Woyane, the Central Council met only twice, both in 2000, instead of the scheduled nine times! As the Chairman decides on all matters between meetings of the Executive Committee and Central Council, he became the sole decision-maker as a result of these circumstances. The negative consequence of this became evident during the Woyane invasion. Transparency, accountability, democratic processes and participatory decision-making were abandoned.
- Traits that were instrumental to the success of our struggle for liberation like transparency, accountability and wide participation were slowly forgotten. Mismanagement in the affairs of the PFDJ and the government became worse and worse. Even at critical moments, people were sidelined. The confidence of the people in the front, front members in the front's leadership, and the front's leadership in its chairman was shaken and diminished.
- On the basis of the constitution of the PFDJ, the Central Office of the PFDJ should administer the affairs of the Front, ensure the independent existence and continuity of activities of the Front, execute the policies, programs and decisions of the Central Council, and, through its Secretary, be accountable to the Executive Committee and the Central Council. The Central Office has, however, exceeded

its mandate and interfered in the affairs of the government, and taken measures that weaken front and government institutions and institutional work in general. The Central Office has gone so far as to endanger the unity of the PFDJ and the people, as well as the security of the nation, by conducting a dangerous and malicious campaign, without the approval or knowledge of the legislative and executive organs of the front, against some members of the Central Council.

- Smear campaigns and name-calling have replaced constructive criticism and self-criticism. No periodic, objective and productive evaluations based on concrete realities and criteria are made; thus, it has not been possible to correct errors and consolidate strengths. The lack of concern for the common good, nurtured complacency and a "why should I care" attitude in others.
- The establishment of PFDJ business entities had an honorable purpose. However:
 - They lack transparency and accountability;
 - They don't follow legal procedures;
 - They are neither guided by a clear policy nor have professional administration;
 - They mix front and government businesses;
 - They have become vengeful enemies of and negative examples for private businesses instead of encouraging them through fair competition and partnership;
 - They are not run by a trust as decided by the Central Council, and they have never presented reports of their accounts to the Central Council as they should;
 - They have never been audited, and thus have never paid taxes to the government on the basis of audited statements;
 - Even if it cannot be said that they have done nothing good, they have lost credibility and goodwill among the people and front members.
- It was decided that the 4th congress of the PFDJ shall be held at the beginning of 1996, and if conditions did not permit, it would be postponed for a maximum of only six months. The fact that it has not been held up to now (2001) is inexcusable. Cognizant of this fact, the Central Council, in its 9th session, decided that the congress be held in March 2001, but none of the tasks (appraisals) that have to be done as preparation to the congress have been done, and the obstacles to its holding have become obvious.

2. Regarding the Government

2.1 The Goals and Programs that were adopted:

After the referendum, as it was not possible to establish a constitutional government before there was a constitution, it was decided that a transitional government be formed for a period of four years within which a constitution and all the institutions necessary for a constitutional government would be put in place. Conscious of the fact that the EPLF, even if it bore the responsibility of leading the struggle to liberation and sovereignty, should not form a government alone as before the referendum, it was decided to issue Proclamation number 37/1993, later amended as proclamation 52/1994 on 19-05-1993, delineating the structure, powers and duties of the government of transition.

- The Eritrean Government of transition would have legislative, executive and judicial branches, which provide checks and balances on each other. It would establish the rule of law, consolidate national harmony, uphold political pluralism and ensure transparency, tolerance and accountability. It would be free from corruption, and would develop a common national outlook. It would further develop, as guarantees for a democratic political order, a free and powerful judicial branch, a conscious civil society, a free, reliable, critical and responsible mass media, and other democratic institutions.
- As it was not proper for the PFDJ to form a government alone, half the seats of the National Council were set aside to be filled by representatives of the people elected to Regional Assemblies, while the other half were reserved for members of the Central Council of the PFDJ.
- The National Council was to have a life of no more than four years and meet at regular intervals of six months. It would elect the President, and approve or ratify the cabinet, government ministries, commissions, authorities and offices proposed by the President. It would review and approve the budget, development plans, proclamations and treaties proposed by the cabinet. It would establish and employ committees to oversee the drafting of the constitution, laws governing political parties, press law, and other laws necessary for constitutional governance. It was to be a legislative body with the highest authority of the government of Eritrea.
- The Cabinet of Ministers was to be accountable to the National Council, and work as the highest executive authority between meetings of the National Council. Its authority and duty was to run the government with collective responsibility, decide on the policy and size of the defense and security forces, direct and follow-up the implementation of political, economic and social policies. It would

decide on issues related to foreign aid and foreign credit. It would hold regular monthly meetings.

- The President is accountable to the National Council, and is the Head of State and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. Besides representing the government in matters domestic and foreign, the President appoints diplomats, delegates and emissaries, and he supervises, controls and coordinates the implementation of government policies and programs. In the absence of the President, the Minister of Regional Administration acts as President.
- The judicial branch is independent and free from the legislative and executive branches, and guards the rights, interests and freedoms of the government, organizations and individuals guaranteed under the law.
- The authority and responsibilities of each ministry, commission, authority and office of the state of Eritrea must be published in the legal gazette.
- The National Council, in its second session of 7.6.93, discussed the need for the establishment of Council committees and its own rules of procedure.
- During the third session of the National Council (2-4 March 1994), the proposed Constitution Commission, the Land Proclamation and the Cabinet of Ministers were approved. Even though the budget for 1994 was not presented, it was decided that starting from 1995, the budget would be presented to the National Council for approval.
- In the seventh session of the National Council (1-2 November 1995), restructuring of the Government;
- In its eighth session of 22-24 January 1996, the Press law;
- In its ninth session of 2 July 1996, the draft constitution were discussed and finalized.
- In the twelfth session of the National Council (1-2 February 2000), which followed the eighth meeting of the Central Council of the PFDJ (25-29 January 2000), the issues raised in the CC pertaining to the state were raised here too and discussed. The issues included, continued neglect of regular meetings,

mismanagement in government, non-separation of authority between PFDJ and the Government, the need to address complaints from the public, the need to speed up the work of the Election Law Committee, steps necessary for the implementation of the constitution, and problems concerning the implementation of the Land Proclamation.

- In its 13th session held 29 September to 2 October 2000, which followed the ninth meeting of the Central Council of the PFDJ, the National Council decided to form committees to make overall review of the 10 year performance of the government, as well as specifically of the third Ethiopian offensive. It also decided to form a military committee to review the organization and performance of the Eritrean Defense Forces and the peace process with Ethiopia, and to advise the president in these areas in the future. It further decided to hold national elections on the basis of the constitution no later than the end of 2001, and to declare the laws governing the formation of political parties. To that effect, a committee charged with drafting laws governing political parties was formed. This committee was instructed to organize public discussions of the party law it drafted, review the views provided by the public, and bring its final draft to the National Council for approval.

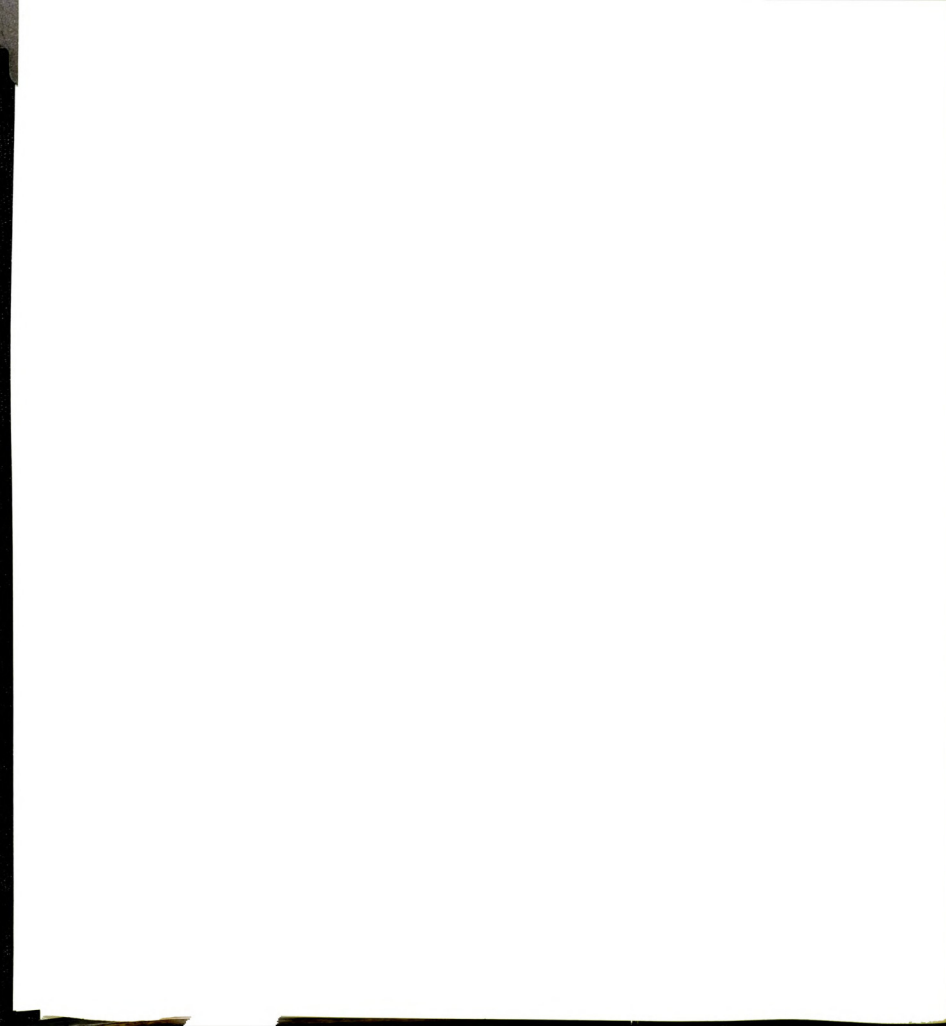
2.2 What was done on the basis of the decisions above?

Even though a lot has been accomplished [during the interim period], much that was illegal and unconstitutional (we did have transitional constitutions for the PFDJ and the government!) was also done. Had this negative experience been avoided, it would have been possible to redouble our achievements and completely eliminate or reduce the problems we faced.

Our pre-independence successes were made possible because there was a very high level of motivation created by our collective responsibility and a very high level of participation. After independence, disillusion set in; and even if there was an attempt to dismiss it as "loss of direction", it was the result of abandonment of the above values and practices. "The president has no one to help him!" became a daily propaganda to blur collective work and individual responsibility. The democratic, participatory and institutionalized method of work we were used to was abandoned. Trust, cooperation and good will were eroded. Holding each other accountable and correcting errors disappeared. Let alone building on the strengths of the EPLF, it even became impossible to maintain what we had. The people's respect for and confidence in the PFDJ and the government slowly changed to doubt and fear. There are many valid reasons for this:

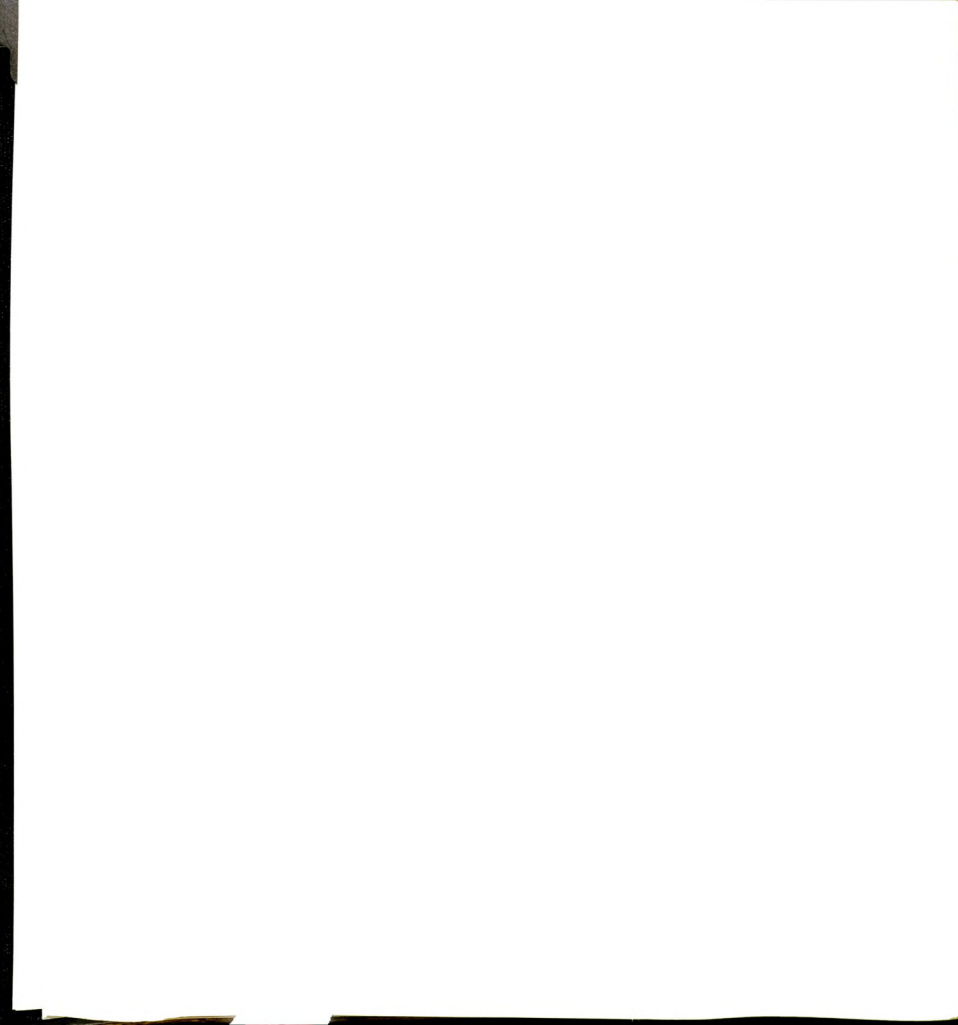
- The interim government, which was not to continue more than four years, has now been in power for eight years.

- Preparations for constitutional government have not been done, and continue to be deliberately delayed. These include:
 - Proclamation of the law governing political parties;
 - Proclamation of election law;
 - Formation of an Electoral Commission;
 - Revision of existing laws to ensure consistency with the constitution;
 - The ratification of regional and international treaties;
 - The establishment of committees of the legislative branch;
 - The establishment of internal rules and regulations of the legislative branch and their practical introduction;
 - The evaluation of the judicial branch;
 - The establishment of the Supreme Court;
 - Dismantling of the Special Courts;
 - Infrastructure for the offices of the National Council.
- The checks and balances between the legislative, executive and judicial branches are non-existent.
- The National Council has no committees or internal rules and guidelines. It does not convene every six months as scheduled. With the exception of the first Cabinet of Ministers it confirmed in its fourth meeting on 2-4 March 1994, it has never confirmed nor has it ever been consulted about all the ministerial changes made since then. It has never been presented with regional or international treaties for its consideration. One of its main oversight functions over the executive branch is to review and approve the national budget, but it has never been presented with any national budget. In fact, since there is no budgetary law, the government has so far operated without any budgetary restraint, and continues to do so.
- The Cabinet of Ministers does not meet every month. From the scheduled 84 meetings, no more than twenty have been held. The cabinet has no system of checking and reviewing implementation of policies, decisions, laws and programs of the government and its agencies. The cabinet has not decided on issues relating to external aid and credit. The cabinet has not decided on the policy and size of



the military and security forces. The cabinet has no coordinated plan or control of national security.

- The President has not convened the regular meetings of the National Council or the Cabinet of Ministers. He has interfered especially in the sensitive Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs, as well as other government agencies, preventing the creation of stable government institutions in the country. When overall restructuring was proposed and implemented in all ministries, he did not implement the reorganization plan in his own Office of the President. For no explained reasons and without the approval of the National Council, the President has changed, "frozen" and demoted Ministers. [In the past ten years after independence, 4 Defense Ministers, 5 Foreign Affairs Ministers, and 6 Finance Ministers have been change]. As Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, he clearly has authority to direct the Ministry of Defense, but the President has directed subordinates of the Minister to report directly to him and has continued to bypass the minister to attend to minute administrative details in this manner. He has encouraged the direct interference of the Central Office of the PFDJ in government ministries thereby compromising their institutional integrity, and creating unnecessary confrontational tension and mistrust between the Central Office and the concerned institutions. Because of his method of work and his demeanor, he has lost the confidence of many front members and people.
- By taking illegal and unconstitutional measures, he has usurped the mandate of the committee entrusted to draft the law governing political parties, and has arbitrarily broadcast the draft election law and the draft party law, causing unnecessary delay. He has also trampled over other Central Council and National Council decisions.
- Because of the weaknesses of the legislative and executive bodies, the President has been acting without restraint, even illegally. Having been used to taking his unrestricted power for granted, he finds it unacceptable now when attempts are being made to have those bodies work properly as well as correct the weaknesses of the system. The President has become so accustomed to acting freely and as he pleased, he is rejecting democratic dialogue, refusing to convene legally required meetings.
- While the judiciary lacks adequate human and institutional capacity, instead of providing resources to build up its capacity, the President has created a competing Special Court reporting directly to him. People are being jailed for years without the knowledge and agreement of the judiciary, and independence of the judiciary and rule of law are being violated.
- As no institution or plan for national security exists, the people have become victims of unexpected threats to its security. In the war with Ethiopia, even if the enemy did not achieve its maximum goal, the Woyane has occupied our land and inflicted incalculable harm on our people, economy and society. What happened



has revealed fundamental weaknesses in the way we function which is in need of correction.

II. What Type of Crisis are we in?

A. What is the Crisis?

The problem is that the President is conducting himself in an illegal and unconstitutional manner, is refusing to consult, and the legislative and executive bodies have not performed their oversight functions properly.

The confidence of the general membership of the front as well as the general public in the leadership and the party has been reduced. This phenomenon has come as a result of alienation that accumulated over time, and it was highlighted as a result of the war with the Woyane and its disastrous consequences. People want a transparent, accountable, institutionalized and legal administration. The people are asking for past experiences to be objectively assessed, corrective measures to be taken, and on the basis of lessons learned, illegal practices to be discarded and correct and institutionalized practices developed to create an atmosphere in which confidence can be restored.

One side is saying:

- Human and democratic rights of citizens should be guaranteed.
- As there was in the defense of the sovereignty of our nation, let there be now too broad participation by PFDJ members and the general public in the appraisal and evaluation of past experiences.
- Let the PFDJ and the government take concrete measures to implement and guarantee their professed aims of establishing a constitutional government.
- Let a constitutional government be established through free and fair elections.
- Let differences inside the front and the government be resolved peacefully, democratically and legally.

The other side:

- Argues saying our professed goals cannot be implemented now because suitable conditions have not yet been created, and there is the danger of "sub-national sectarianism";
- Argues further that we should not have an open discussion, assessment and evaluation because this could lead to a rift between the government and the people, and our enemies may exploit the situation;

- Characterizes any criticism as anti-front and anti-unity, and is quick to portray it as and equalize it with serving the enemy's agenda.
- Closes all legal avenues and forums for dialogue and shelves decisions that should be implemented;
- Is delaying the front's congress and national elections to perpetuate the existing order;
- Attempts to muzzle any serious views and opposition by instilling fear, and threatening to take illegal and undemocratic action.

After liberation, the people expected peace and improvement in their lives. However, when the unexpected war with the Woyane came, the people, on top of all the sacrifices they made during the struggle for liberation, had to make heavy sacrifices again to defend their sovereignty, and now find themselves victims of heavier hardships and agonizing displacement. As long as the danger from the enemy was present, the people restrained themselves and chose not to speak loudly against government weaknesses and mismanagement. But instead of taking action to correct its mistakes, the government has tried to cover them up and to silence criticism by threats creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. The people have thus now started to express their concerns and speak out.

B. How can the crisis be resolved?

- When the President is ready to be governed by the constitution and the law, and when the legislative and executive branches perform their legal functions properly;
- When confidence is placed on the members of the front and the general public, and they are allowed to exercise their right to participate in open discussions of important national issues, and when the legislative and executive organs of the PFDJ and the government hold their regular and emergency meetings and exercise their powers;
- When the PFDJ's and the government's experiences of the past seven years are discussed and reviewed in open forums with wide public participation, and lessons learned are utilized for the future;
- When the law of party formation is proclaimed, and parties are allowed to form and are encouraged to compete peacefully and freely;
- When elections to the Fourth Party Congress are conducted freely and fairly, and the future of the PFDJ as a political party/organization, which must be governed by the same party laws to be proclaimed, is democratically decided at the fourth congress;

- When assurances are in place for free and fair national elections, and when preparatory steps (proclamation of election law, party law, and formation of electoral commission) for the elections are quickly taken;
- When the impartiality of the mass media is assured to encourage the protection of human rights, freedom of expression and political discourse; when the formation and freedom of action of civic organization are allowed and encouraged; when the Special Courts are dismantled; when those who have been imprisoned for a long time without a court order are brought before a regular court of law; when the independence of the judiciary is guaranteed;
- When participatory procedures are established to formulate clear and declared policies to address the gap in the standard of living, the lack of job and educational opportunity in different localities and communities.

III. Why this letter and at this time?

BECAUSE all legal means to resolve this crisis in the legislative bodies have been blocked, frustrated. The President has refused to convene meetings of the legislative bodies, but continues to express his views and taking illegal action. Front members have the legal right to know the current situation and to state their views and criticisms.

As the conduct of the PFDJ and the government deteriorated and became more erratic, particularly concerning the Woyane war and its consequences, an attempt to revive wider participation in decision-making, eliminate existing weaknesses and reinforce our defense was made at the eighth session of the Central Council (28-29 January 2000). At this meeting, the president was asked why regular meetings of the legislative organs were not held, and an impassioned demand was made to hold regular meeting on time in the future. The president, however, not only tried to present the unacceptable excuse that conditions were not conducive to hold meetings, but arrogantly added that he was not going to call meetings in the future either if he did not feel it was conducive to do so.

Since the Woyane was getting ready for its offensive, the issue was not raised at the twelfth session of the National Council to avoid giving moral ammunition to the enemy. The president however continued to take wrong, illegal and vengeful measures that could serve the enemy's purpose.

At the ninth meeting of the Central Council which was convened from 31 August to 2 September 2000 (after the third invasion), and to some extent at 13th session of the National Council, which was held from 29 September to 2 October 2000, the following were raised, among others. Genuine reviews to be conducted, to look forward and establish deadlines for holding the front congress and national elections, measures which are necessary preparation for such to be taken, and important issues requiring preparatory study to be studied. Since military and diplomatic efforts had to be strengthened, the

Council also decided to form a military committee to do an appraisal of our record in these areas and to advise the president in the future. However, obstacles are being placed to block the implementation of any of these decisions.

In January 2001, the president, by way of the Central Office of the PFDJ, conducted a disturbing open smear campaign accusing high officials of regionalism and treason. Seminars were conducted that suggested there was a fifth column inside the country, that equated honest criticism with aiding the Woyane's agenda, and that threatened action would be taken against the targeted high officials. This was done to silence free expression and muzzle criticism, and to avoid proper evaluation. This disturbed and created serious concern among the people and members of the front.

Although the illegal and negative handling of the issue by the President and the Central Office of the PFDJ was provocative, we decided to avoid confrontation as there was as yet no guarantee for a peaceful end to the war with Ethiopia, and took the initiative to resolve the problem through legal means and dialogue. We started to consult with other members of the Central Council to ask for meetings of the Central and National Councils whose regular time was past due.

Upon hearing of our initiative, the central office of the PFDJ had circulated a letter (), on August 7th 2001, threatening members of the National Council not to sign on a petition calling for a meeting of the National Council. We thought this action improper and were forced to counter with our own letter to all members of the National Council the following day explaining the situation). On 12-03-2001, the President rejected our request ().

Copies of our letter of 20 February 2001, asking the President to convene meetings of the Central Council of the PFDJ and the National Council, which reached him on 13 March 2001 (), his negative reply (), our second letter again asking for meetings explaining the reasons for our call (), and the President's second negative response () are all enclosed with this letter. Legal requests received illegal responses, and our attempts to resolve problems through meetings and democratic dialogue, not only fell on deaf ears, but attempts were also made to mis-present it in an illegal and undemocratic way.

Thus, our efforts to amend and correct the mistaken path of the PFDJ and the government, our attempt to ensure a democratic transition to a constitutional order, our resolve to obtain these results through democratic and legal means at the leadership level has failed to bear fruit. Having no other means at our disposal, and rejecting resort to illegal means, we bring this open letter to you. We believe every member has the right to know about the crisis and our views on how to solve it. We believe every member has the right and the duty to know about the democratic solutions available, and we perform our duty in bringing this crisis to your attention in this open letter.

Just as we bear ultimate collective responsibility for our performance as leaders, we are obliged to bear equal responsibility for correcting our failures. Since our failure to lead

properly has injured the people, we are prepared and determined to make amends and compensate our people by working tirelessly to build, in concert with other PFDJ members and the general Eritrean public, an accountable and responsible government in Eritrea.

If there is any accusation against any member of the Central and National Councils, from the President on down, then we support and believe, that instead of blackmailing, the accusation should be openly leveled at the subject member during a meeting of the appropriate Council, and if it merits legal action, for the appropriate court to handle it through due process of law. Every member of the Central Council of the PFDJ and the National Council must be accountable in the performance of his duties or his handling of financial records, and, as a public official, in his morality. We call for the creation of an independent body that includes members of the general public, to investigate every member.

If we do not take corrective action immediately but instead continue as we have been, then it is not hard to imagine from the experiences of the past ten years the devastating consequences that await us. We need act in concert to resolve our differences, to avoid our security being compromised and our internal unity is weakened, thereby exposing us to becoming victims of external forces. This is a serious national affair. Determined, courageous, capable and nationalist Eritreans must play their role. Let them utilize their capacity to contribute their share to their country. Let us take practical lessons from the Woyane invasion. We should never risk compromising our hard won independence and making our fertile land barren. Time is passing, and our external enemies have not folded their hands waiting for us.

We shall continue our struggle to establish the rule of law. We shall continue to struggle to implement the sacred ideals and principles of the front and our national constitution. We shall continue to struggle using every legal and democratic means available. We have no ambition other than making these sacred ideals a reality. We take this opportunity to call on all PFDJ members and the Eritrean people in general to express their opinion through legal and democratic means and to give their support to the goals and principles they consider just.

Signatories:

1. Mahmud Ahmed Sheriffo

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council

2. Haile Woldensae

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council
- Ministerial cabinet member



3. Mesfin Hagos

- Member of the Central Council and the Executive Committee of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council

4. Ogbe Abrha (General)

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council

5. Hamid Hmd

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council

6. Saleh Kekya

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council

7. Estifanos Seyoum (B. General)

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council

8. Berhane GhebreEghzabiher

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council

9. Astier Feshatsion

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council

10. Mohammed Berhan Blata

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council

11. Petros Solomon

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council - Ministerial cabinet member

12. Germano Nati

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council

13. Beraki Ghebreslassie

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council



14. Adhanom Ghebremariam

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council

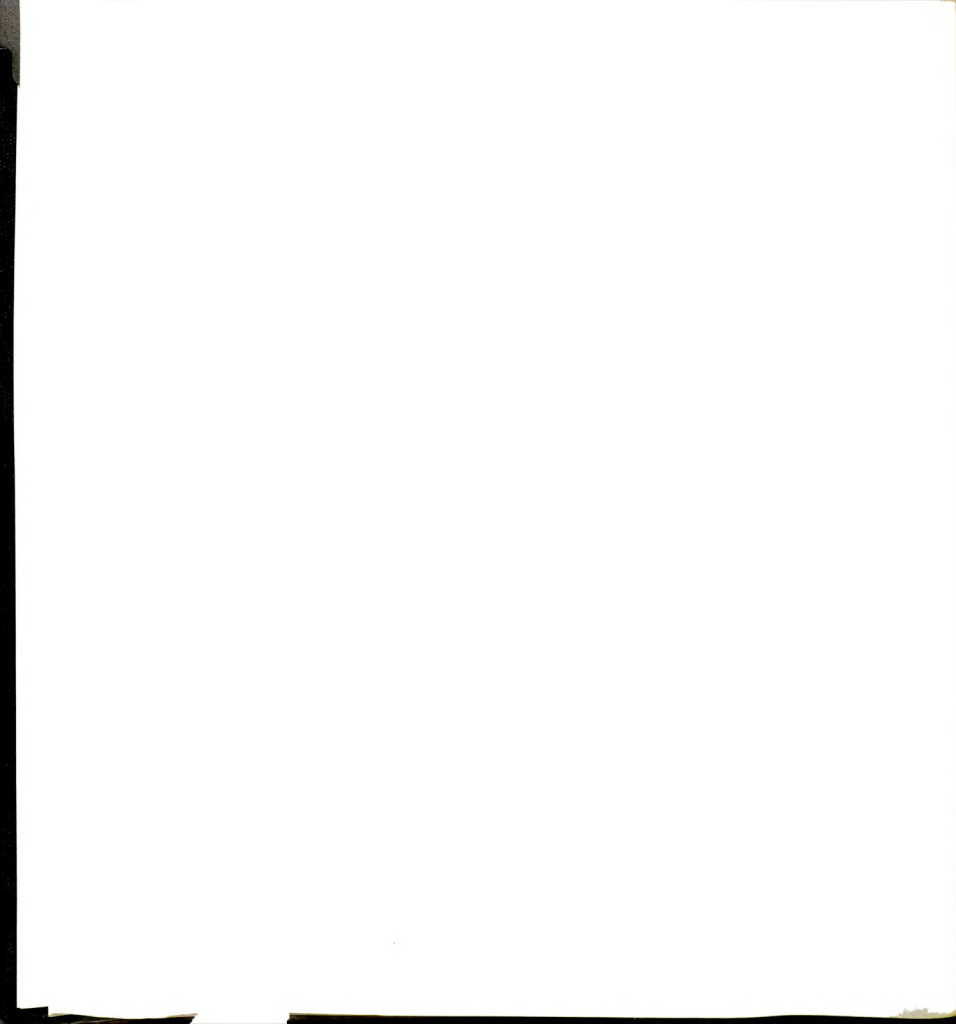
15. Haile Menkerios

- Member of the Central Council of PFDJ
- Member of the National Council



APPENDIX C

Glossary of Tigrinya (and Arabic) Terms



'adi ዓዲ	village or town
agelglot አገልገሎት	lit., service, as in National Service
akayadit shumagalle አካይዲት ሹማጋለ	executive committee
askari አስካሪ	Eritrean soldiers who served in the Italian colonial army
B'al Ledet ብዓል ለደት	Christmas
baito ባይቶ	assembly, council
beles በለስ	cactus fruit; also slang for seasonal visitors from the diaspora
boon ቡን	coffee
deki-anistyo ደቂኣነስትዮ	women
enda አንዳ	lit., “place of.” Also refers to a family or lineage.
enda hazen አንዳ ሓዘን	funeral wake
equb ዕኩብ	informal rotating credit association
Fasika ፋሲካ	Easter
gebar ገባር	tax-payer or serf
geza kenesha ገዛ ከንሻ	neighborhood in Asmara heavily populated by Protestants
gezawuti ገዛውቲ	neighborhood (sometimes refers to male agnatic lineage)
gwyla ጉይላ	party with live music, food, and circular, collective dancing
habesha ሃበሻ	lit. “Abyssinian;” familiar term for highland Eritreans and Ethiopians
hafash ሃፋሽ	the masses



hagay ሃጋይ	summer, or the dry season; corresponds with winter months in the US
halewti ሃለዉቲ	sentinels
Hamadi'e ሃ.ማ.ደ.ኤ.	Tigrinya acronym for National Union of Eritrean Women: <i>Hagerawi Mahaber Deki-anisteyo Ertra</i>
Hegdef ዐ.ገ.ደ.ፍ.	Tigrinya acronym for People's Front for Democracy and Justice: <i>Hizbawi Genbar ne Democrassen Fithen</i>
hibrete-seb ህብረተ-ሰብ	community (general)
hizbawi genbar ህዝባዊ ገንባር	lit., “people’s front,” familiar term for EPLF and PFDJ
hizbi ህዝቢ	people
injera ኦንጀራ	traditional spongy flat bread; staple food
Jebha ጅብሃ	Arabic, lit. “front.” Familiar term for ELF
kebessa ከበሳ	highland regions
kenesha ክነሻ	Protestant Christian
keremti ክረምቲ	winter, or the rainy season; corresponds with summer months in US
keremtawi ma'etot ክረምታዊ ማእቶት	student summer campaign; mandatory work programs for high schoolers, part of national reconstruction
kifli hizbi ክፍሊ ህዝቢ	Department of Public Administration (EPLF), lit. “peoples’ department,” responsible for mass organizations
mahber; mahber kom ማሓበር, ምሓበር-ኮም	formal association; community association
m'alti deki-anistyoy ምዓልቲ ደቂኣነስትዮ	International Women’s Day, March 8
m'alti natsinet ምዓልቲ ናጽነት	Independence Day, May 24

m'alti semaetat	ምዓልቲ ሰማታት	Martyrs' Day, June 20
Menka'	መንክዕ	lit. "bat." 1975 dissident movement within EPLF
menenet	መንነት	lit., "identity;" also used to refer to national ID card or citizenship
metahit	መተሕት	lowlands
nakfa	ናቕፋ	Eritrean currency, named after northern town where EPLF was headquartered and decisive battle with Ethiopia took place
natsinet	ናጽነት	liberation; independence
negdet	ነግደት	patron saint day; celebrated by towns and neighborhoods
sedet	ሰደት	exile, diaspora, condition of being a refugee
sedetegnata	ሰደተኛታት	exiles, refugees (sing., sedentegna)
semaetat	ሰማታት	martyrs
Sha'bia (Shaebia)	ሸዓቢያ	familiar term for EPLF
shahi	ሻሂ	tea
shifto	ሻፍታ	bandits
shumagalle	ሹማግለ	committee, elders, or lords/landowners
tariqa	ታሪቃ	Muslim brotherhood
tchenfer	ቲንፈር	branch or chapter
tegadelay, tegadelti (pl.)	ተጋደላይ, ተጋደልቲ	guerrilla fighter(s)
tigre	ትግረ	vassals or serfs; also the name of an ethno-linguistic group (Tigre)
Timkat	ጥምቀት	Orthodox holiday commemorating Jesus' baptism



wushtawi andeheki ውሽታዊ አንደሕኪ

internal rules (of an organization)

zilzil tibs ዝልዝል ትብስ

traditional dish of strips of meat with
peppers and onions in a spicy sauce, eaten
with injera

zoba ዞባ

zone (administrative)

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