

Working Paper Number 105

Eritrea's Nation and State-building: Re-assessing the impact of 'the struggle'¹

Sara Rich Dorman*

Presented at the Conference on Globalisation and Self-Determination,
London, 4th April 2003

In the April 2003 issue of Atlantic Monthly, Robert Kaplan describes Eritrea as “newly independent, sleepily calm and remarkably stable”. Electricity is said to fail infrequently, corruption is rare, theft and crime almost unheard of, reflecting, Kaplan claims, “a surprisingly functional social order” Eritrea is said to have “achieved a degree of non-coercive social discipline” by implication, unusual for Africa. The country's political culture is described as “an almost Maoist degree of mobilization and an almost Albanian degree of xenophobia.” In this account, Eritrea is an exotic specimen, not quite African, atypical in almost all respects.

But is Eritrea accurately reflected or understood in this account? Is Eritrea really as isolated and marginal as this suggests? Is its development agenda and state-building project that divergent from elsewhere? Kaplan hints that Eritrea's sense of nationhood — “rare in a world of nation-states rent by tribalism and globalisation” — exists despite globalisation. But this is in complete contrast to current research which emphasizes that “transnationalism does not necessarily operate in opposition to nationalism but can at times work to reinforce it”. In contrast, Kaplan's article takes as read the official account of Eritrean nationalism, emphasizing that it is a product not simply of its history, but also of its having been isolated and alienated from international and regional influences: “we Eritreans are different from our neighbours”.

May 2003

* School of Social and Political Studies,
University of Edinburgh
sara.dorman@ed.ac.uk

¹ Many thanks to my usual editor, WJ Dorman, for comments on an earlier draft.

In the April 2003 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, Robert Kaplan describes Eritrea as “newly independent, sleepily calm and remarkably stable”.² Electricity is said to fail infrequently, corruption is rare, theft and crime almost unheard of, reflecting, Kaplan claims, “a surprisingly functional social order”.³ Eritrea is said to have “achieved a degree of non-coercive social discipline” by implication, unusual for Africa.⁴ The country’s political culture is described as “an almost Maoist degree of mobilization and an almost Albanian degree of xenophobia.”⁵ In this account, Eritrea is an exotic specimen, not quite African, atypical in almost all respects.

But is Eritrea accurately reflected or understood in this account? Is Eritrea really as isolated and marginal as this suggests? Is its development agenda and state-building project that divergent from elsewhere? Kaplan hints that Eritrea’s sense of nationhood — “rare in a world of nation-states rent by tribalism and globalisation” — exists *despite* globalisation. But this is in complete contrast to current research which emphasizes that “transnationalism does not necessarily operate in opposition to nationalism but can at times work to reinforce it”.⁶ In contrast, Kaplan’s article takes as read the official account of Eritrean nationalism, emphasizing that it is a product not simply of its history, but also of its having been isolated and alienated from international and regional influences: “we Eritreans are different from our neighbours”.⁷

Kaplan’s article conforms to many standard accounts of the Eritrean struggle for liberation and experience of statehood.⁸ But despite its orthodoxy and pervasiveness, it is increasingly contested, by events on the ground, and research. Whereas in Zimbabwean historiography, it was the ‘peasant question’ that forced the re-evaluation of the nationalist legacy, in Eritrea, research on land, as well as gender issues, the diaspora, and globalisation are beginning to generate important counter-narratives. The paper seeks to

² Robert Kaplan, “A Tale Of Two Colonies” *Atlantic Monthly* April 2003., pp 46-53. <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2003/04/kaplan.htm>.

³ Kaplan, “Tale Of Two Colonies” page 52

⁴ Kaplan, “Tale Of Two Colonies” page 51.

⁵ Kaplan, “Tale Of Two Colonies” page 52

⁶ Victoria Bernal, “Eritrea and the global village: reflections on nationalism in a transnational era” unpublished paper, 1. Similar points are made in Soren Walther Nielsen, “Reintegration of ex-Fighters in Highland Eritrea: a window into the process of State formation and its lines of Social Stratification” Unpublished PhD thesis, Roskilde University, Denmark, October 2002 see especially chapter 5; John Sorenson and Atsuko Matsuoka, “Phantom Wars and Cyberwars: Abyssinian Fundamentalism and Catastrophe in Eritrea” *Dialectical Anthropology* 26 (2001), 37-63; Nadjie Al-Ali, Richard Black and Khalid Koser, “Refugees and transnationalism: the experience of Bosnians and Eritreans in Europe” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27, 4 (2001), 615-634; Nadjie Al-Ali, Richard Black and Khalid Koser, “The limits to ‘transnationalism: Bosnian and Eritrean refugees in Europe as emerging transnational communities” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, 4 (2001), 578-600.

⁷ Kaplan, “Tale Of Two Colonies” 52

⁸ Kaplan is, of course, by no means the only journalist writing in this mode, although he is probably the most prominent. Before the 1998 war, glowing tributes to Eritrea were very much the norm, and were frequently reprinted in the Eritrean official press. See for other examples: Peter Worthington, “Menace Of Foreign Aid” *Toronto Sun*, 28 December 1998, which describes Eritrea as “the most unusual [country] in Africa, if not the world”; or Robert Weissman, “An African Star? Free Eritrea Faces the Challenges Ahead” *Multinational Monitor* July/August 1996. A more in-depth, but similarly panegyric account is to be found in: Dan Connell, “Eritrea: Starting from Scratch” *ROAPE* 66 (1995), pp. 587-592.

investigate both the discursive power of conventional narratives and the implications of this new research for accounts of state and nation-building in Eritrea.

Liberation and letting go

The conventional account of Eritrean nationalism is grounded in Eritrea's 30-year struggle for independence, which in 1991 culminated in de facto independence when EPLF troops took control of the capital Asmara. Recognized at this point by most of the international community, the 1993 UN-supervised referendum merely codified and legitimised the sovereignty of the territory.⁹ The Eritrean liberation fighters were rightly celebrated for their innovativeness and resilience. Contemporaneous accounts emphasize the liberation movement's commitment to gender equality and to eliminating harmful traditional practices such as FGM. Fighters constructed positive relations with local populations, bringing them medicine and education, and sharing their meagre rations with them rather than extracting resources from the impoverished communities.¹⁰ Who has not been impressed with the numerous accounts and pictures of Eritrean hospitals and schools hidden under ground and under trees, yet clearly meeting the needs of the injured and pupils?¹¹

These exertions were necessary because few recognized the Eritrean right to self-determination. Colonized by the Italians in the late 1800s, Eritrea was never properly decolonised. The end of World War Two resulted in its being granted to Britain as a 'mandate territory' until 1952. In 1952 Eritrea was federated into Ethiopia as an autonomous region, a situation that soon deteriorated, as Ethiopia forcefully integrated Eritrea into its state. The flawed decision to pursue federation reflected divisions within Eritrea, and divisions among the great powers, all of whom had their own interests at heart.¹² Organised armed resistance to federation, first took form in the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) which was founded in Cairo in 1960. The ELF drew its original supporters from the Muslim community in Eritrea, and received support mainly from Arab and Muslim states. Conflicts within the ELF drove out reformers, who formed the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in the early 1970s.¹³ The EPLF then dedicated itself to creating a secular, unified liberation movement with the ability to win the support of the masses and drive the Ethiopians out of Eritrea permanently.

⁹ For an interesting discussion of why Eritrea was recognized as sovereign but not Somaliland, see: Hussein Adam, "Formation and recognition of new states: Somaliland in contrast to Eritrea" *ROAPE* 59, (1994) 21-38.

¹⁰ See for instance, Dan Connell, *Against All Odds* (New Jersey: Red Sea, 1993) Chapter 4 "Hearts and Minds" or Richard Leonard, "Popular participation in Liberation and Revolution" in Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson eds, *The Long Struggle of Eritrea* (UK: Spokesman, 1988).

¹¹ For classic images of the struggle see James Firebrace with Stuart Holland, *Never Kneel Down* (New Jersey: Red Sea, 1985); Glenys Kinnock, *Eritrea: images of war and peace* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988) or Dan Connell, *Against All Odds* (New Jersey: Red Sea, 1993).

¹² See for an excellent account: Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).

¹³ The best account of this period remains John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987) Chapter 5 "The Eritrean Revolution" and/or John Markakis, "The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea" *JMAS* 26, 1 (1988), 51-70.

It is difficult to capture how deeply the ethos of the liberation struggle and the EPLF appears to have penetrated Eritrean society – the streets of Asmara are marked by the struggle, not just in renamed streets and official art and sculpture, but also the names of shops and businesses. Similarly, children born during the struggle were given names like ‘Harnet’ (Liberation/Freedom). The multiplicity of challenges to Eritrea’s nationhood – from the UN, the OAU, neighbouring states, and world powers – meant that the Eritrean struggle for self-determination has a particular potency. It is constitutive of Eritrean identity and citizenship, as well as of nationhood. As one scholar of liberation narratives put it, we must study “how the Eritreans made the revolution and how the revolution made them in turn”¹⁴

Liberation and self-determination were not simply goals achieved with the EPLF’s victory in 1991; they continue to structure political discourse, debate and national policies. Two recent theses, on the self-perceptions of Eritreans, reflect widespread opinion about Eritrean identity and values. Hoyle’s thesis investigated the national identity “promoted by the EPLF in motivating young [people] to exchange their lives for an Eritrean nation”.¹⁵ Based on interviews and surveys at the University of Asmara, Hoyle identified what she calls component values of Eritrean national identity: ethical behaviour, belief in critical public speech, perseverance or steadfastness, an emphasis on the community over the individual, and a commitment to self-reliance.¹⁶ Ofuho’s thesis, based on interviews with elite and ex-fighter Eritreans, as well as students at the University of Asmara, proposed that:

Unlike Ethiopians who viewed liberation more as a means for democratising states structures, Eritreans viewed liberation as a way of life, a road to self-determination and independence....Liberation for the Eritrean becomes a civic virtue through a common war experience...the actual struggle is not viewed as a way towards liberation, but as ‘liberation or emancipation’ itself.¹⁷

The post-liberation state is not simply marked by the ‘heritage’ of the war, but continues to be actively shaped by the imperatives of the struggle. As Martin Doornbos has stated “the continued importance of the liberation struggle...to the composition and orientation of Eritrea’s political leadership can hardly be overestimated”.¹⁸

¹⁴ Cirino Hiteng Ofuho, “Discourses On Liberation And Democracy”. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kent (1997), page 90.

¹⁵ Peggy Ann Hoyle, “Eritrean National Identity: a case study” in *North Carolina Journal of international Law and Commercial regulation* 24, 2 (1999), 401; the portions of the article which I cite derive directly from her thesis: Peggy Ann Hoyle, “Eritrean national identity: the role of education and the constitution” (PhD thesis, UNC, 1997).

¹⁶ Hoyle, “Eritrean National Identity” pp. 401-5.

¹⁷ Ofuho, “Discourses On Liberation And Democracy”, page 271; See also his article “Discourses on Liberation and Democracy – Eritrean Self-views” *The Electronic Review of World Politics* 1, 1 (2000).

¹⁸ Martin Doornbos, “The war torn societies project in Eritrea: an introduction” in Martin Doornbos and Alemseged Tesfai eds. *Post Conflict Eritrea: prospects for Reconstruction and development* (New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1999), page 9.

Politics of Research in Eritrea

Foreign journalists and academics have played almost as important a role in narrating, documenting, and advancing the nationalist agenda as the Eritrean fighters themselves.¹⁹ It is also striking how many of the key intellectuals dedicated to advancing the Eritrean nationalist struggle had been involved in similar projects elsewhere on the continent. In many ways, the Eritrean struggle avoided many of the pitfalls of earlier, yet flawed, revolutions and seemed markedly progressive. Thus in Eritrea, we find a nationalist history *par excellence*, with all that school's weaknesses and strengths.²⁰ Most importantly, this history challenged Ethiopian myths of regional dominance, which had proven remarkably potent on the world stage.²¹ This research was thus an important component in establishing Eritrea's right to sovereignty.

More problematically, since independence, research has continued to be tightly controlled in the service of the 'national interest'.²² For example, the War-torn Societies Project was an attempt to extend participant-action research from the micro- to the macro- level in societies rebuilding after war. In Eritrea, the local researchers chosen were almost all senior government officials. In Doornbos' words, this 'had the effect, if not the intention, that no independent researchers would be making enquiries into policy areas that might possibly be considered sensitive'.²³ More generally, the research project 'became closely tied with the government'.²⁴ The Eritreans are described as having averted the danger of "diluting control over the policy process" by "effectively 'nationalizing' the core research establishment".²⁵ Now, in terms of the government's objectives, this is clearly a positive outcome. But for our current concerns, it also contributed to a particular kind of research "less devoted to weighing the pros and cons of a specific policy issue" and providing instead "a broad baseline survey of the main issues and challenges".²⁶

Perhaps in 1995, when the project began, the lack of data on Eritrea was the most significant challenge to policy-making. But questions must also be asked about the data used. As one sympathetic reviewer commented, "there is little talk about or assessment of the views and needs of the various local communities...and how exactly these communities were 'in dialogue' with the project".²⁷ Yet this book, published in 1999, remains the only major engagement with development issues in Eritrea since the 1993

¹⁹ Dan Connell, *Against All Odds* (New Jersey: Red Sea, 1993); Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson eds, *The Long Struggle of Eritrea* (UK: Spokesman, 1998); John Sorenson, "Discourses on Eritrean Nationalism and Identity" *JMAS* 29, 2 (1991), pp 310-317; Roy Pateman, "Liberte, Egalite Fraternite: Aspects of the Eritrean Revolution" *JMAS* 28, 3 (1990), pp. 457-472.

²⁰ See Bill Freund, "Africanist History and the History of Africa" Chapter 1 of *The Making of Contemporary History* (Macmillan, 1998) for an important assessment of African historiography.

²¹ Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), esp. Chapters 2 and 3.

²² See for instance, Nielsen's account of attempting to gain research clearance (Nielsen, "Reintegration of ex-Fighters in Highland Eritrea" (Annex: Research methodologies), also, consider the theme of the University of Asmara's first international research symposium: 'The Role Of Research In Nation-Building' (June 2002).

²³ Doornbos, "The War-torn Societies Project" page 16.

²⁴ Doornbos, "The War-torn Societies Project" page 25.

²⁵ Doornbos, "The War-torn Societies Project" pp 25-6.

²⁶ Doornbos, "The War-torn Societies Project" page 20.

²⁷ Jon Abbink, Review of Doornbos and Tesfai, *Post Conflict Eritrea* *JMAS* 38, 3 (Sept 2000), 525.

publication *Emergent Eritrea*.²⁸ As the sub-titles of these two books tell us, they are interested in the ‘challenges’ of and ‘prospects’ for development. Yet, as academics we are called upon to analyse existing policies, examine their impacts on communities, and establish their strengths and weaknesses.²⁹

The War-torn Societies Project also illustrates another dilemma of contemporary scholarship: how to distinguish between peoples, governments, and states. Doornbos identified the high level involvement of government officials as an issue of ‘national ownership’. The problem here seems to be, however, that the ‘nation’ (and also the state) is defined as the government. This analytic confusion is significant, because it lies at the heart of the current government’s definition and role in Eritrea: the identity of the nationalist movement and its political manifestation, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), are near indistinguishable from that of the state.

Reassessing Liberation, little by little

Despite efforts to control research, some incremental steps towards reassessing liberation and the post-liberation state have been taken, mostly by anthropologists, much of it unpublished. Current political unrest in Eritrea has also resulted in re-assessments of the history of the liberation war, mostly on the web.³⁰ In the following sections, I want to review some of this new material, and see how it contributes to reassessing Eritrea’s pre- and post-independence politics.³¹

Some interpret the post-liberation policies of the EPLF/PFDJ as an enviable continuity of their pre-independence politics: self-reliance, solidarity, and unity.³² But these accounts fail to explain how and why the Eritrean polity could also come to be accused of human rights abuses, how senior members of the struggle remain in jail, why revered spokespeople fear to speak their minds, why undergraduate students at the University of Asmara resist undertaking research topics on Eritrean politics.³³

²⁸ Gebre Hiwot Tesfagiorgis ed., *Emergent Eritrea: Challenges of Economic Development* (New Jersey: Red Sea, 1993).

²⁹ A model here might be the approach taken by Wendy James *et al*, who compile insightful anthropological research on both the pre-1991 and post 1991 periods in Ethiopia: Wendy James, Donald Donham, Eisei Kurimoto and Alessandro Triulzi eds. *Remapping Ethiopia, socialism and after* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002)

³⁰ See for instance: Saleh Gadi, “Kebire, the Father of Martyrs” messelna.com; Taher Indoul, “In memory of Awate, the history maker” 1 September 2001, awate.com; “Live From Syria: a trip down memory lane: a glimpse into Eritrean History” awate.com 2 February 2003; “ELF military Activities 1968-1969” awate.com 12 February 2003.

³¹ In practice, the text of this paper emphasizes the post-liberation politics. Incremental points made about the liberation struggle include Kjetil Tronvoll’s account of forced conscription to the EPLF, and Soren Nielsen’s accounts of sexual harassment of women fighters. Kjetil Tronvoll, *Mai Weini* (New Jersey: Red Sea, 1998) pp.57-8, 174-75 and Nielsen, “Reintegration of Ex-fighters” pp. 168-174.

³² See for instance, Dan Connell, “The importance of self-reliance: NGOs and Democracy-building in Eritrea” *Middle East Report*, Spring 2000) pages 28-32; Dan Connell, “New Challenges in Post-War Eritrea” *Eritrean Studies Review* 1, 2 (1997), pages 129-159; Dan Connell, *Rethinking Revolution: New Strategies for Democracy and Social Justice* (New Jersey, Red Sea Press, 2002) .

³³ For a concise account of Eritrea’s political crisis, see Martin Plaut, “The Birth of the Eritrean Reform Movement” *ROAPE* 91 (2002), pp.119-124.

Instead, emerging narratives challenge us to question the impact of the liberation war, and the nature of the state. The Eritrean post-liberation state is widely recognized to be strong, controlling and mobilized³⁴, but the reasons for this are complex. The influences which have created such a phenomenon – when it is often argued that globalisation is weakening the nation-state – are manifold. Although most authors would credit the learning curve of the long struggle, other influences, including continuities with previous regimes and the modernist paradigm are also important.

For instance, Matsuoka and Sorenson argue that processes of top-down administration and control are part of a dialectic in Eritrean liberation politics:

Over the course of the history of the Eritrean nationalist movement two contradictory tendencies have opposed one another...an egalitarian tendency has encouraged self-reliance...opposing this is a tendency to control everything. This tendency is rooted in some authoritarian aspects of traditional culture and in the exigencies of a prolonged and desperate war.³⁵

Others emphasize the impact of 30 years of conflict on the leadership:

..the sheer brutality of the war and the massive social dislocation it occasioned was understood as necessitating a movement that had to be exceptionally disciplined while also intimately attuned to the sympathies of the people. *Nationalism therefore became impregnated by the model of war, whose own specific culture and terminology it tended to assimilate into the ordinary language of nationalist militancy.*³⁶

Or, as Nielsen puts it less emotively, the “ethos of fighting...produced the legitimacy and sovereignty of the Eritrean post-war state.”³⁷ But Nielsen himself would question accounts of monolithic states and societies. If anthropological and micro-level political research reveals nothing else, it surely shows how varied experiences of war – and post war – can be for populations. And as Rock *et al* argued as early as 1996, earlier divisions may still persist, despite the unifying impact of the struggle:

The country’s long war for self-determination may in fact have been characterised not by the integration and mutual fuelling of different levels and types of conflict but more by the subsuming of all other differences that had potential for conflict to the one ‘national’ struggle against Ethiopian overrule;

³⁴ For a discussion of mobilizing and demobilizing tendencies in post-liberation states see Sara Rich Dorman, “From the Politics of Inclusion to the Politics of Exclusion: NGOs and the Constitutional Debate in Zimbabwe” *JSAS* (forthcoming).

³⁵ Atsuko Matsuoka and John Sorenson, “After independence: prospects for Women in Eritrea” unpublished paper, n.d.

³⁶ Ofuho, “Discourses on Liberation and Democracy: Eritrean self-views”. n.p.; emphasis added.

³⁷ Nielsen, “Re-integration of Ex-fighters” 11.

*other possible conflicts may have been obscured or put on hold during the liberation war.*³⁸

Rock *et al* are referring mainly to resource conflicts, but Victoria Bernal makes exactly the same point regarding gender issues: "...some profound issues of gender relations in society were not so much transformed by EPLF's cultural revolution as repressed and rendered invisible."³⁹ Tekle Woldemikael also warns of the potential politicisation of cultural and religious cleavages in independent Eritrea.⁴⁰ These arguments suggest that we need to move beyond a simplistic emphasis on the liberation war in order to identify the influences on the Eritrean state-building project.

One approach has been to identify continuities with previous regimes. Christopher Clapham controversially suggests that "Eritrean nationalism...appears to reproduce, within the colonial boundaries of Eritrea, a concept of boundary and territory almost indistinguishable from that of both imperial and revolutionary governments in the years before 1991 in Ethiopia as a whole."⁴¹ Many policies – unitary administration, ethnicity, suspicion of 'new churches' and the mobilization of youth – do seem to reflect the politics of Ethiopia when the current generation of leaders were students. But these policies also reflect the modernizing aims of the Eritrean leadership. As we will see below, this framework of modernism helps us understand not only attitudes towards secularism, identity, and administration but also to issues of land use, and development approaches.⁴²

Citizenship & Governance

Post-liberation politics has been marked by a series of self-consciously 'nation-building' policies. These have attempted to mould a national identity out of the multi-ethnic and religiously plural population.

A major policy initiative was the reorganization of administrative units created for purposes of 'divide and rule' under previous administrations. The 6 new regions overlap and integrate previous, ethnically defined, regions.⁴³ Eritrean nationalist discourse emphasizes that because of such efforts, national identity has become more important than ethnicity for Eritreans. Data collected by Eric Garcetti in 1997 backed up this

³⁸ June Rock, Lionel Cliffe and Philip White, "The potential for Conflicts over environmental Resources in Eritrea and the Types of mechanisms or Initiatives that need to be in place for conflict management" Paper prepared for the conference on the Environment, Asmara, 12-16 February 1996. emphasis added.

³⁹ Bernal, "From Warriors to Wives" page 9; see also Victoria Bernal, "Equality to Die for? Women Guerilla Fighters and Eritrea's Cultural Revolution" *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 23, 2 (2000), 61-76.

⁴⁰ Tekle Woldemikael, "The Cultural Construction of Eritrean Nationalist Movements" in Crawford Young ed. *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison: university of Wisconsin, 1993), pp 179-199.

⁴¹ Christopher Clapham, "Boundary and territory in the Horn of Africa" in Paul Nugent and A.I. Asiwaju eds, *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities* London: Pinter, 1996), 242.

⁴² James Scott, *Seeing like a state* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); See also, Donald Donham, *Marxist Modern* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).

⁴³ "Eritrea to have 6 administrative regions" *Eritrea Profile*, 20 May 1995, page 1; see also Tesfai, "Issues of Governance" pp 274-279.

claim.⁴⁴ At the same time, both the EPLF and the PFDJ have promoted the cultural aspects of ethnic groups – their languages, dances, and music.⁴⁵ Despite this, Tronvoll has argued that efforts to “bypass and thus neutralize, the traditional organising principles of ethnicity and descent” must not “push too hard, too fast, to neutralize the identities below the level of the state, since this may very well back-fire on the process of achieving national unity, and creating and sustaining a national Eritrean identity.”⁴⁶

Language policy designed to serve “national identity, unity and interest”⁴⁷ has also proved controversial. Rather than advancing one or more national languages, a policy developed during the struggles advocates the equality of all Eritrean languages. As the PFDJ official Zemheret Yohannes puts it:

The Eritrean experiment is an attempt to strike a viable and judicious balance between the fundamental rights of language groups for cultural and linguistic self-affirmation, on the one hand, and the demands of living within a nation-state in an increasing globalizing world on the other.⁴⁸

Under the national language policy, students are guaranteed instruction in their mother tongue in their first five years of education. Yet Naty notes that the elites of some Muslim groups see the promotion of multiple small, previously unwritten languages as a way of advancing Tigrinya, over Arabic (which is not the mother tongue of most Muslim Eritreans).⁴⁹ Chefena Hailemariam’s recently concluded doctoral research similarly identifies dissatisfaction with the official policy among certain population groups.⁵⁰ Arabic-speaking journalists have also complained of marginalization.⁵¹

Eritrean nationalism and identity has also been actively inculcated in expatriate populations. Several recent pieces of research on the diaspora emphasize the Eritrean government’s success in institutionalising a trans-national Eritrean identity, such that nationalism and trans-nationalism cannot be seen as opposing forces. Victoria Bernal emphasizes the ways in which the liberation struggle itself was transnational.⁵² Since independence, this emphasis has been maintained. Festivals and meetings of expatriate

⁴⁴ Eric Garcetti, ““civic and ethnic Allegiances: Competing Visions of Nationalist Discourse in the Horn of Africa” paper presented to the International Studies Association 16-20 February 1999; See also Eric Garcetti and Janet Gruber, “The Post-war nation: Rethinking the Triple Transition in Eritrea” in M Pugh ed., *The Regeneration of War-torn societies* (London: Macmillan, 1999)

⁴⁵ See Abbebe Kifleyesus’ interesting paper “Folk-Fairs and festivals as Cultural Conservation: featuring festival Ertra” paper presented to the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project Workshop: Culture in Sustainable Development, May 2002.

⁴⁶ Kjetil Tronvoll, “The process of nation-building in post-war Eritrea” *JMAS* 36, 3 (1998), 464-5

⁴⁷ “Unity in linguistic diversity” Interview with Abdella Jaber, *Eritrea Profile*, 27 July 1996, page 2.

⁴⁸ Zemheret Yohannes, “Homecoming: a return to our Languages” paper presented at the International Conference: Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21st century. 11-17 January 2000.

⁴⁹ Alex Naty, “Potential conflicts in the former Gash-setit region, western Eritrea”. Unpublished paper presented at the OSSREA conference, Khartoum, Sudan, 2002, page 2.

⁵⁰ Chefena Hailemariam, *Language and Education in Eritrea: a case study of language diversity, policy and practice* (Amsterdam: Aksant Academic Publishers, 2002).

⁵¹ “No room for Arabic in Eritrea?” Gedab investigative report. *Awate.com* 6 March 2002.

⁵² Bernal, “Eritrea and the Global Village” 6-9.

communities are attended by Ministers and PFDJ officials, who contribute to link expatriates to the state, as well as the nation. The Eritrean diaspora has been granted Eritrean citizenship, and are eligible to vote in referenda and elections. These expatriate communities, which contributed voluntarily to support the liberation struggle, have also been taxed 2% of their income. Al-ali *et al* note that support for this taxation was not party-specific: most expatriate Eritreans – even those affiliated to the ELF – were still willing to pay “on the understanding that these payments were being used to rebuild Eritrea”.⁵³ A more cynical account, relayed to me by an expatriate, makes the point that if you do not pay the tax, “nothing will get done for you”.

Nation-building policies have also targeted the generation that has come of age since 1991, by implementing youth service programmes. National service for all was introduced in 1994 and written into the 1997 constitution. It was designed to create a trained reserve army, connect young people to the older, liberation-war generation, and to develop cross-cultural understanding by integrating the different ethnic groups and religions.⁵⁴ The programme involved all ‘youth’ between the ages of 18 and 40 undergoing 6 months military training and 12 months of work in various ministries. In the same summer, the student work programme was initiated, which saw secondary school students providing agricultural and environmental services under the supervision of the Ministry of Education.⁵⁵ In an interview, President Isaias emphasized, “Everybody recruited for national service has to go. As for those who create lame excuses for not going, let them know that there is no way one can evade it.”⁵⁶

Groups which refused to participate in these programmes have been denied the right to citizenship. The first group to resist national service was the small community of Jehovah’s Witnesses. This led the government to claim that they had “relinquished’ their rights to citizenship by categorically and repeatedly refusing to recognize the state of Eritrea and its laws”.⁵⁷ According to Human Rights Watch, four Jehovah’s Witnesses who resisted conscription have been jailed for more than 5 years.⁵⁸

Since the Eritrean-Ethiopian war of 1998-2000, many other young people have attempted to avoid conscription, at least in part because the original 18 months service has been extended indefinitely – most of those mobilized in May 1998 are still serving (either in the army or at civilian jobs) at a pecuniary wage.⁵⁹ As a result, increasing numbers of students and conscripts have attempted to evade the state’s strict control of

⁵³ Al-Ali *et al*, “Limits to transnationalism” 595.

⁵⁴ “Benefits of National Service Stressed” *Eritrea Profile* 21 May 1994 Vol 1 Number 10 page 1; “National Service – the facts” *Eritrea Profile* 4 June 1994, Vol 1 Number 12 Page 4; ‘The Law Of The Land’. *Eritrea Profile* 28 January 1995, Vol 1 No. 46 page 5.

⁵⁵ “Work For Idle Hands” *Eritrea Profile* 25 June 1994 Vol 1 Number 15 Page 8; ‘Summer Student Program And National Reconstruction’ *Eritrea Profile* 28 July 1997, Vol 4 No 16 Page 2.

⁵⁶ ‘President’s reply to questions from the public: part II’ *Eritrea Profile* 7 March 1998, Vol 4 Number 52 Page 3.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Interior, “Statement on Jehovah’s witnesses” 1 March 1995 as published in *Eritrea Profile* 4 March 1995, page 3; see also Government of Eritrea “A Presidential Directive On Jehovah’s Witnesses”, 25 October 1994; and BBC Summary of World Broadcasts 4 March 1995.

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2003* page 33.

⁵⁹ For a detailed discussion of the politics of national service see: Sara Rich Dorman, “Youth, the State, and Politics in Post-Liberation Eritrea”. Paper presented at the African Studies Seminar, University of Edinburgh, February 2003.

population movement, by hiding, fleeing to Ethiopia, Yemen and the Sudan, or forging exit visas.⁶⁰ Crackdowns on those evading service have included the arrest of mothers and brothers – in some cases these have been senior members of the liberation movement.⁶¹

Local government is another area which reveals a top-down approach to citizens. In direct contrast to Ethiopia (and Uganda, the other functioning ‘movement’ system), Eritrea’s post 1991 governance emphasized unitary structures. Eritrea has been lauded for the progressively making administrators and councillors equal. But the Baitos – people’s assemblies – have not been able to function as expected. As Asmerom Zerie argued in his study of Zoba Maakel Baito, despite the importance of Baitos as deliberative structures, they have no financial autonomy, being dependent on the regional administration for all resources.⁶² His research revealed that this lack of resources weakens the Baito’s accountability, and prevents it from meeting its obligations to residents and voters.⁶³ An obvious concomitant effect of this has been the lowering of respect among residents for the Baito members and institutions. Whereas Baitos and regional administrators are sometimes described as being (de jure) at the same level of authority,⁶⁴ they are subordinate (de facto) to the appointed administrators. Further increasing the power of appointed officials in mid- 2002, there were widespread reports that all regional administrators had been replaced with military generals.⁶⁵ Local elections which began in 2002, seem unlikely to increase bottom-up power. Government news sources report that in almost all villages, previously appointed administrators and deputies have been elected.⁶⁶

Despite the recent local-level elections, the legislative and judicial branches of government have remained under-developed in Eritrea. Alemseged Tesfai seems to predict this outcome in his useful assessment of EPLF administration during the liberation war. As he notes,

The Central Committee and the Politburo...combined executive and legislative powers. The judicial...was virtually non-existent...at the time of Independence all the elements of a strong executive branch were present. Not so with the other two branches.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ See for instance, “39 members of Eritrean navy flee to Yemen” *Walta Information Centre* [Ethiopia], 2 October 2002; “Eritrean deserters in enemy land” *IRIN* 22 November 2002; “Government Calls up Graduates for national Service” *IRIN* 13 November 2002; “Nearly Forty dissident University Students arrested” *Awate.com* 13 May 2002; “Twelve Killed in Roundup (“Gffa”) Clashes” *awate.com* July 17, 2002; “Intense Nighttime Roundups—“Gffa”—In Eritrea” *awate.com* July 9, 2002; Alex Last “Eritrea sweeps capital for draft dodgers” *Reuters*, 19 April 1999.

⁶¹ Amnesty International, “Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists” 18 September 2002, page 13.

⁶² Asmerom Zerie, “The role of baito in the development process: a case study of Zoba Maakel” Senior research paper, Dept of political science, University of Asmara, June 2002, 31.

⁶³ Zerie, page 31.

⁶⁴ Alemseged Tesfai, “Issues of Governance in the Eritrean Context” in Doornbos and Tesfai, *Post-Conflict Eritrea* page 265.

⁶⁵ See for instance, “The Freezing of General Sebhat Ephrem” Gedab news *awate.com* 13 October 2002; “Mr Naizghi Kiflu: out from intensive care unit; back to threats” Gedab news *Awate.com*, 9 January 2003.

⁶⁶ Yohannes Keleta “Local elections in sub zoba Hagaz” *Shaebia news*, 3 January 2003.

⁶⁷ Tesfai, “Issues of Governance” pp. 261-2.

This situation continued during the post-independence years, despite efforts to train judges and build new institutions. Epitomized by the failure to implement the Constitution – itself the result of a markedly participatory process – the weakness of both judiciary and legislature erupted into crisis in 2001. The reform movement which emerged in 2000 and 2001, criticized the failure to implement the ratified constitution, and called for much-delayed meetings of both the party deliberative structures, and the national legislature.⁶⁸ The subsequent detentions of journalists, students, and prominent members of the liberation struggle (including former generals and cabinet ministers), with no charges brought against them, further revealed the limitations of judicial independence.

Development

Development policy has been key to Eritrea's self-definition in the post-independence period. It has formed an important part of the new discourse of self-reliance. As an article from the Toronto Sun began: "What makes Eritrea...the most unusual [state] in Africa, if not the world, is that it doesn't like foreign aid...it's also the safest, least corrupt, most self-reliant."⁶⁹ Starting out without any foreign debt at all, Eritrea seemed to be forging a new direction in development, and was widely acclaimed for its rejection of conditional aid and willingness to liberalize the economy.

The adoption of liberalization is generally interpreted as a pragmatic move.⁷⁰ Despite Eritrea's apparent enthusiasm for privatising state-enterprises, privatisation has in practice often meant the creation of "para-partatals" -- party-owned firms.⁷¹ Nielsen sees this development as merely a new manifestation of a much older EPLF entrepreneurial activities, which included many businesses owned and run in Italy, the Sudan, and the Middle East, sourcing goods from as far away as Asia.⁷² Either way, these developments enable the party to dominate the 'private' sector in much of Eritrea's economy.⁷³ There was even a remarkably candid interview in the English-language press, in which the head of economic affairs at PFDJ was asked "is the PFDJ not monopolizing all economic activities". He replied that it was too early to come to such a conclusion, noting that "the PFDJ is doing everything in broad daylight, openly!".⁷⁴

⁶⁸ See Plaut, "Birth of the Eritrean Reform movement" 122; and the various letters to and from the reformers, attached to "Open letter to EPLF members" on *asmarino.com* n.d.

⁶⁹ Worthington, "Menace Of Foreign Aid" n.p.

⁷⁰ Habtom Zerai, "The Political Economy Of Privatisation In Eritrea" Senior Research paper, Dept of Political Science University of Asmara, August 2000.

⁷¹ Tekeste Negash and Kjetil Tronvoll, *Brothers at War: making sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), page 40.

⁷² Nielsen, "Reintegration of Ex-Fighters" pp. 205-212.

⁷³ Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government* (2001), 178-9; two intriguing accounts of PFDJ's operations can be found at "The scandal of massawa Airport" Gedab investigative report *awate.com* 9 October 2002 and "The Spokesperson, The governor, The secretary and the Director" Gedab investigative report *awate.com* 4 January 2002.

⁷⁴ "PFDJ and Eritrean economy" an interview with Ato Hagos Gebrehiwot. *Eritrea Profile*, 1 July 1995, page 3.

Eritrea's reputation for honesty and low levels of corruption has also been widely trumpeted. Former American Congressman and law professor, Tom Campbell is probably the most high-profile proponent of Eritrea's investment potential, because of its purported low levels of corruption.⁷⁵ Nielsen makes the contrary argument, that successive waves of 'anti-corruption campaigns' reveal the presence of high-level corruption during and after the struggle.⁷⁶

Eritrea's relationship with loaners and donors, has also been distinct, with the government insisting that most funds are transferred to ministries, restricting the activities of NGOs, and resisting conditionalities. While this has been interpreted as a sign of self-reliance, it also reflects the governments' desire to maintain centralised, top-down control over expenditures and initiatives.⁷⁷

As in other predominantly rural African states, land and agriculture are at the heart of most development agendas. Unlike other struggles, land did not play a dominant role in the discourse of liberation, but the EPLF did address land issues in liberated zones, and established a land commission soon after independence. The land policy gives Eritreans usufruct rights in either the village of their mother or father. But although only isolated and partial studies have been carried out into the implementation of the policy, it appears that practice has been very far from theory. The policy will prove particularly problematic in urban-periphery villages, which as Emba-Derho, studied by Nielsen. In this community, conflicts over land, and access to land for ex-fighters led to illegal house constructions, threatened demolition, and the jailing of a demobilized female fighter, trying to build a house for her family.⁷⁸ As this suggests the land issue manifests itself in Asmara as an extreme housing shortage. Although some, (including Robert Kaplan), believe that there are no informal housing areas in Asmara, they are simply well hidden. Not only are there some informal areas in Asmara, which are denied most services, but crowding within established urban dwellings is extra-ordinary.⁷⁹ The recent urban land distributions may improve access to land, but preliminary research suggests that it will lead to informal and impracticable arrangements between those with access to land, and those with the means to build on that land.

Land issues in rural areas are also salient because the Eritrean reconstruction agenda involves settling new, and returning, populations in the fertile western lowlands, which were historically inhabited by pastoralist communities.⁸⁰ The expectation is that

⁷⁵ Tom Campbell, "How Law and Economic development Fit Together" paper presented at University of Asmara's first international research symposium: 'The Role Of Research In Nation-Building' (18 June 2002).

⁷⁶ Nielsen, "Reintegration of Ex-Fighters" pp. 187-193.

⁷⁷ For a good investigation of these debates, see Rachel Hayman, "Reconciling Ownership of Development and External Assistance: aid and nation-building in Eritrea" unpublished MSc Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2002.

⁷⁸ Nielsen, "Reintegration of ex-Fighters in Highland Eritrea" pages 284-293.

⁷⁹ Petros Bahta, "The Shelter Dimension in Eritrea's urban Crisis: an enquiry into Urban Politics, Social Exclusion and Squatter Settlements in Asmara" PhD proposal, University of Tilburg, The Netherlands (2002); see also Araia Tseggai, "Eritrean urban housing problem: meeting the challenge" *Eritrea Profile* 6 May 1995, page 3, which records a villa on the Asmara periphery containing eight families with 47 individual members in the mid-1990s.

⁸⁰ Lionel Cliffe, "After the Ethiopia-Eritrea War: setting the agenda for rehabilitation, sustainable peace and regional Co-operation" unpublished paper. Page 16.

highlanders and former refugees will settle in the lowlands and pursue agriculture. Abdelkader Saleh indicates that state-sponsored irrigation schemes have already led to encroachment on arable land in Gash-Barka.⁸¹ This sets the development agenda – with its emphasis on self-reliance in the production of food crops – on a potential collision with the rights of local communities. In guaranteeing all Eritreans access to land for agriculture, the land proclamation makes no arrangement for pastoralist land use. As Alex Naty notes in a thought-provoking paper, despite the significant efforts made to increase national integration, population shifts and other pressures have the potential to unleash local conflicts.⁸²

In addition to settling communities on former pasture-land, the Eritrean government also advocates the sedentarization/villagization of pastoralist communities. This is not necessarily an anti-pastoralist policy (although the desire to control Muslim populations may play a part in their thinking). Sedentarization also reflects a nationalist desire to provide the same resources to people everywhere, regardless of their occupation or ethnic group.⁸³ The administrative boundary changes and resettlement of refugees in the western lowlands, have long been recognized as a potential area of conflict. At the time of the administrative changes, the minister responsible acknowledged the potential for conflict between pastoralists and new settlements, but stated that the nomads “should eventually settle down and develop their land”.⁸⁴

Sedentarization, which has proven to be disastrous throughout the horn, is a component of the broader ‘modernising’ approach to agricultural production, which is also visible in policies advocating large state-run and/or commercial farms.⁸⁵ This appears to be very much the model currently being advocated in Eritrea. Currently much of the manpower for such schemes is thought to be being provided by the warsai-yikealo initiative, which involves national service conscripts in development work. Cliffe is sceptical about the sustainability of “armies of tractors and national service personnel” in food production and the scheme has generated much political discontent among youth.⁸⁶

Demobilization

Demobilization has been another important aspect of Eritrea’s transition. The most interesting research on the experiences of fighters in post-liberation Eritrea revolves around the insights of gender-oriented research. This entry-point into the experiences of

⁸¹ Abdelkader Saleh, “problems and Prospects of socio-economic development of pastoral communities in Eritrea” a paper prepared for the University of Asmara Research symposium, 15-18 July 2002.

⁸² Alex Naty, “Potential conflicts in the former Gash-setit region, western Eritrea”. Paper presented at the OSSREA conference, Khartoum, Sudan, 2002.

⁸³ See the debates in “Proceedings from a Seminar on the formation of the Drylands Coordination Group in Eritrea. March 26-28th 2001.

⁸⁴ “Why a new administrative structure” interview with Mahmoud Sherifo, *Eritrea Profile*, 3 June 1995, page 5.

⁸⁵ Gavin Williams, “Taking the Part of the Peasants” in Peter Gutkind and Immanuel Wallerstein eds. *Political Economy of Contemporary Africa* 2nd edition (Sage: Beverly Hills, 1985).

⁸⁶ Cliffe, “After the Ethiopia-Eritrea war” page 16; for polemical critiques of the scheme see: “Adhanom Gebremariam, “The Warsay/Yikealo campaign – a campaign of Slavery” (7 parts) *asmario.com* and Eritrean Youth Action Network, “Education and Development – not war and slavery” *awate.com*.

both women and fighters (and women-fighters) in Eritrea has doubtless been privileged as a site of research because of the prominence given to accounts of women fighters and gender-blind policies in the EPLF.⁸⁷ Such narratives continue to have power, and continue to circulate. Note for instance Asgedet Stefanos' recent photo-essay: "Eritrean women: defending national borders and challenging gender boundaries".⁸⁸ In this essay, accompanying photos by Cheryl Hatch taken during the 1998-2000 war, Asgedet argues that "it is within this struggle to establish and maintain nationhood that a profound shift occurred that expanded Eritrean women's role in politics, the economy, the family and education".⁸⁹ She argues that Hatch's images provide "a model of strength, of survival, of beauty, and of successful agency...these portraits convey the degree to which women themselves are creators of their own destinies in contemporary Eritrea."⁹⁰ Indeed, the images do show a positive and multi-faceted view of women in Eritrea. But other research suggests that women's re-insertion into civilian life has been much more problematic. Matsuoka and Sorenson note critically that the Eritrean Constitution does not specifically mention gender issues. They also note, as do many others, that gender-based household divisions of labour have remained static. And that some female ex-combatants have had a hard time adjusting to the 'new' expectations of them in civilian life, despite the government's formal commitment to bring gender equality and emancipation to women.⁹¹ Another anthropologist examining the experience of ex-fighter women, argues that while the liberation war did liberate women to compete with men, it continued to devalue the 'women's sphere'.⁹² Noting the problems faced by women ex-fighters, many of whom feel devalued in the new Eritrea, Bernal suggests that "the EPLF created a kind of gender equality by eliminating the domestic sphere and feminine identity".⁹³ She notes:

If women gained some equality by acting like and being treated as honorary men in the Front, this is unworkable in civilian life, where women are mothers and childcare and domestic work are no longer organised as public work.⁹⁴

Bernal queries the way in which women as fighters have become "mythico-historical" figures in nationalist history, but are "rendered irrelevant to the new nationalist project of development".⁹⁵ Interestingly, Christine Mason's work might be seen to contribute to this, by reclaiming the importance of women supporting the struggle through more

⁸⁷ See for instance, Amrit Wilson, *The Challenge Road: Women and the Eritrean Revolution* (New Jersey: Red Sea, 1991); Firebrace and Holland, *Never Kneel Down* pp. 38-41; Connell, *Against All Odds*, Chapter 8.

⁸⁸ Asgedet Stefanos, "Eritrean Women: Defending National Borders And Challenging Gender Boundaries" *SAIS review* (Summer-Fall 2000) pp. 167-181.

⁸⁹ Stefanos, "Eritrean women" page 167.

⁹⁰ Stefanos, "Eritrean women" page 171.

⁹¹ Matsuoka and Sorenson, *passim*.

⁹² Victoria Bernal, "From Warriors to Wives: Contradictions of Liberation and development in Eritrea" *Northeast African Studies* (forthcoming).

⁹³ Bernal, "From Warriors to Wives" manuscript page 3.

⁹⁴ Bernal, "From Warriors to Wives" manuscript page 19.

⁹⁵ Bernal, "From Warriors to Wives" manuscript page 22.

‘traditional’ roles in the ELF.⁹⁶ She argues that the standard EPLF account of women in the struggle “essentializes women’s role in the nationalist project and prioritises certain activities over others”.⁹⁷ Through this research, she not only challenges assumptions about the role of women in the ELF, but about the ELF itself. Not only do the women she interviews feel “excluded from Eritrean history, myth and political rhetoric”⁹⁸ but the ELF has itself been written out of history in the interests of “exclud[ing] dissenting voices in order to preserve an artificial unity”.⁹⁹

International relations: nationhood re-defended

Kaplan’s depiction of a sleepy peaceful Eritrea, certainly did not capture the internal tensions of recent months – disappearances, and arrests of many EPLF leaders and ordinary citizens, explosions in Asmara city-centre, and the ever-present fear of renewed conflict with Sudan or Ethiopia.

Since 1991, Eritrea has engaged in two formal armed conflicts: in 1996 with Yemen; 1998-2000 with Ethiopia. Tension with Sudan emerged in the mid-1990s when it was alleged that Sudan supported the Eritrean Islamic Jihad. In the months before the conflict with Ethiopia, a reader of government statements and newspapers would have been forgiven for expecting conflict with Sudan, not Ethiopia, such was the level of verbal confrontation. And again in mid- 2002, as the Sudanese government alleged that the Eritrean army was fighting in the eastern Sudan, alongside the NDA, tension again flared. As Lionel Cliffe has argued, the pattern of “mutual intervention” in which “opponents of existing regimes all receive some support from...other countries in the region” makes the resolution of conflict in the Horn particularly difficult.¹⁰⁰

This pattern of conflict has also been linked to the earlier struggle, in particular, the “character of the movements and the states they created”.¹⁰¹ As Cliffe argues, the experiences of the TPLF and EPLF did not engender political learning about compromise:

Both had a history of engaging in a principled battle for rights that they proclaimed and moreover won a complete victory in doing so. They are thus unused to the arts of compromise, to searching for a solution acceptable to both sides; they have little experience and few skills in diplomacy.¹⁰²

He suggests that the root cause of the war is governmental weaknesses: “the decision-making mechanisms of both governments and a certain democratic deficiency, together

⁹⁶ Christine Mason, “Gender, Nationalism and Revolution: Re-assessing women’s relationship with the Eritrean Liberation Front” Working paper number 274, Women and International Development, Michigan State University, December 2001.

⁹⁷ Mason, “Gender, Nationalism and Revolution” page 1.

⁹⁸ Mason, “Gender, Nationalism and Revolution” page 12.

⁹⁹ Mason, “Gender, Nationalism and Revolution” abstract/cover page.

¹⁰⁰ Lionel Cliffe, “Regional Dimensions of conflict in the Horn of Africa” *TWQ* 20, 1 (1999).

¹⁰¹ Lionel Cliffe, “After the Ethiopia-Eritrea War” draft unpublished paper, page 9.

¹⁰² Lionel Cliffe, “After the Ethiopia-Eritrea War” draft unpublished paper, page 9.

with the absence of adequate institutional arrangements for dialogue and conflict resolution...precipitated a massive escalation of a minor containable conflict”¹⁰³ Ruth Iyob, who has presented one of the most convincing explanations for Eritrea’s apparently belligerent stance, theorizes it further. She similarly argues that the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia was under-institutionalized, and as such, prone to misunderstandings and conflicts. But she also describes Eritrea as a proto-typical ‘diaspora state’, which in extending citizenship outside its borders to its diaspora, came to threaten the state-building project of its former ally, Ethiopia.¹⁰⁴

As this suggests, these recent conflicts may have an important role to play in nation-building. Cliffe, for instance, wonders whether Africa, repeating a pattern where by “the struggle to shape and define national identities is in part played out through both internal wars, but also wars between states that in turn redefine those states”.¹⁰⁵ This is exactly the point investigated by Chris Clapham in a recent paper on war and state-making, in Nielsen’s thesis and in a paper by Tronvoll.¹⁰⁶ Nielsen argues that in Eritrea, “war can be seen as an instrument of economic and political regeneration that leads to the creation of a new postcolonial hegemony”.¹⁰⁷ Clapham, referring more to the 1998-2000 conflict, is dubious about the long-term sustainability of national identities founded through war, but does note that “war helps to promote a sense of solidarity from which the incumbent governments benefit”.¹⁰⁸ Tronvoll however argues that in Eritrea:

conflicts [are considered] necessary for the demarcation of ...religious..ethnic..political..and territorial borders and boundaries, in order both to defend what they perceive as competing claims to parts of `eritrean territory and to re-establish ‘significant others’ that the ‘formal’ eritrean identity may be contrasted against.¹⁰⁹

One important forum for debating the war and constructing identities among transnational communities in both Eritrea and Ethiopia, was the internet. Alessandro Triulzi notes how:

The respective diaspora joined in and loudly took part in the globalized realm of internet. New suppressed memories were made to surface and came to be articulated during this period in a fierce new battle of definitions and slogans concerning the ‘we’ and ‘them’, the ‘nation’ and its ‘enemy’.¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ Lionel Cliffe, “After the Ethiopia-Eritrea War” draft unpublished paper, page 4.

¹⁰⁴ Ruth Iyob, “The Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict: diasporic vs. hegemonic states in the Horn of Africa, 1991-2000” *JMAS* 38, 4 (2000), 659-682.

¹⁰⁵ Lionel Cliffe, “After the Ethiopia-Eritrea War” draft unpublished paper, page 22.

¹⁰⁶ Christopher Clapham, “War and state formation in Ethiopia and Eritrea” paper presented to the Failed States Conference, Florence, 10-14 April 2001.

¹⁰⁷ Nielsen, “Reintegration of Ex-fighters in Highland Eritrea” page 7.

¹⁰⁸ Clapham, “War and state formation in Ethiopia and Eritrea” page 12.

¹⁰⁹ Kjetil Tronvoll, “Borders of violence – boundaries of identity: demarcating the Eritrean nation-state” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, 6 (1999), 1056.

¹¹⁰ Alessandro Triulzi “Colonial Violence and the transfer of memories in the Ethio-Eritrean War 1998” unpublished paper; see also Sorenson and Matsuoka, “Phantom Wars and Cyberwars”.

But the war, and political repercussions since 2000, may also have damaged relations between the Eritrean state and the diaspora. Khalid Koser notes that while the diaspora “reunited itself to defend its country” during the war, there was also “a growing sense of disillusionment with the Eritrean state”.¹¹¹ Based on interviews within the Eritrean diaspora, he proposes that the war has also contributed to the “long term alienation of an important part of the external support base for the authoritarian regime”.¹¹² Eritreans in the diaspora increasingly feel as though their liberation-based symbiotic relationship with the state has been ruptured.¹¹³

Conclusions

The research presented above is in direct contrast with Kaplan’s stable and disciplined Eritrea. Yet, these arguments accord neatly with other current research into state-building, democratisation and conflict in Africa. In a draft paper examining conflict in Zanzibar and Zimbabwe since the 2000 elections Dorman and Cameron emphasize that these violent conflicts emanated from the perceived failure of the nationalist regime to ‘bring the benefits of independence’ equally to all regions and groups. Conflict in these two cases, we propose, should be interpreted as reflecting the unraveling of the post-independence coalition of forces, formerly held in check by authoritarian politics and state expenditure.¹¹⁴

Such accounts, which emphasize the coalitional nature of liberation struggle, and their heterogeneous nature, were made about nationalism in West Africa in the 1950s and 1960s¹¹⁵, and have re-emerged through the detailed historiography of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle.¹¹⁶ But in Eritrea, which like those other struggles, emphasized the unity of the Eritrean people (whose very existence was questioned) such accounts threaten the very basis of the regime’s legitimacy, but may also be interpreted as threatening the nation’s legitimacy. In a way not experienced in Zimbabwe or Ghana, whose right to existence was never questioned (but merely the right to majority rule), Eritrea’s myths of unity and self-reliance were not just constructed to strengthen the liberation movement, but to advance the very existence of the putative nation. The history of Eritrea’s struggle is so inter-twined with a narrative of the EPLF’s own history and

¹¹¹ Khalid Koser. “Une diaspora divisée? Transferts et Transformations au sein de la diaspora Érythréenne” *Politique Africaine* 85 (2002), page 71. (my translation).

¹¹² Koser. “Une diaspora divisée?” Page 71.

¹¹³ Koser. “Une diaspora divisée?” Page 73.

¹¹⁴ Sara Rich Dorman and Greg Cameron, *Problems of Nationalism and Democratization in Africa: Zimbabwe and Tanzania* (forthcoming).

¹¹⁵ See especially, Aristide Zolberg, *Creating Political Order: The Party States of West Africa* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966), esp. 44-47.

¹¹⁶ For example, Jocelyn Alexander, Joann McGregor, and Terence Ranger, *Violence and Memory* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000); Brian Raftopoulos and Tsuneo Yoshikuni eds. *Sites of Struggle* (Harare: Weaver, 1999).

ethos, that distinguishing the two is nearly unthinkable. While those of us outside may see Eritrea as ‘here to stay’, those who battled to build the nation and the state, may find such narratives to be more challenging. In the light of Eritrea’s on-going conflicts with neighbours, and scarce resources, contested narratives of liberation are construed as threatening Eritrea’s existence. The necessity of upholding one orthodox account becomes paramount. But multi-vocal narratives dominate the internet, as on-line groups commemorate ELF martyrs, document the incarceration of EPLF die-hards, and challenge the PFDJ’s dominance of discourse. Unable to control discourse, the strategy is to deny them the moral right to speak: to label those outside the orthodox account as ‘treasonous’ and ‘pro-Ethiopian’, which can only retard and damage the state and nation-building project underway in Eritrea.

As the Eritreans say, “Awet n’hafash!”— Victory to the masses!