

## POLITICS AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN ERITREAN STUDIES, c. 1970–1991: THE MAKING OF *VOIX ÉRYTHRÉE*

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**ABSTRACT** This essay explores the nuances of identity construction in Eritrea from about 1970 to 1991. Thirty years of war (from 1961 to 1991) left Eritrea with a legacy of images and their interpreters on the world stage. Less well known, however, is that Eritrea's would-be interpreters only joined in the rebellion after its first decade. While they helped reinvent Eritrea and expand Western support for the war, their actions also fueled new conflicts at home, as some identities had to be filtered, discounted, or displaced. Embodying this process is *voix Érythrée*, the view of nation making that prevailed at the end of the war. The essay examines how *voix Érythrée* took shape in the 1970s and 1980s, the individuals who formed the coalition of insurgent leaders and foot soldiers that nurtured the transformations, and how information about Eritrea in Western journals changed from a trickle to a flood. It also discusses major shifts in loyalties in Eritrea, how such shifts fed into the construction and appeal of liberationist discourse, and the building blocks of the field of Eritrean studies.

**Key Words:** Elite-mass relations; Liberation fronts; National identity construction; Shifting loyalties; *Voix Érythrée*.<sup>(1)</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Numerous images have been applied to modern Eritrea. For decades prior to the 1980s, the Red Sea territory had been represented variously as a long-imagined but unconsummated *regnum*; as a “proving ground” of colonizers’ illusions; as Ethiopia’s most implacable province; and as the theatre of “the loneliest war” waged by “the world’s most sophisticated guerrilla fighting force” (Kaplan, 1988: 58, 59). The war ended in 1991, and independent Eritrea became a new oasis of peace in a conflict-ridden region (Connell, 1994; cf. Pateman, 1991c). Some of these constructs speak to Eritrea’s place as an *entrêpot* in a region located at the crossroads of identities. Other images have emerged within the same frame of time, since at least the 1940s. However, most have been preferred imaginations of Eritrea writ large on the world stage, designed to build up off-shore support for Eritrea far more than to shed light on conditions within it. Scholars have also been loath to engage with the internal politics of Eritrean identity construction as well as the nuances of its dominant discourses. Investigations free from war-related pressure have been rarer still.<sup>(2)</sup>

To fill some of these gaps, this article examines the phases and changes in representations of Eritrea in the two decades since approximately 1970. I draw on a close reading of the literature and my fieldwork in Eritrea, which explored the web of identities and images upon which modern Eritrea rests and how

these images and identities have fed into domestic politics and changed over time. I discuss how some of these identities were filtered, discounted, displaced, or re-invented as the insurgent campaign evolved, and how such shifts affected loyalties within Eritrea as well as the reach of the insurgent campaign. I also point out critical gaps in the large body of literature that has since formed the core of Eritrean studies, comment on specific conceptual and analytical contributions to the debate, and outline some implications of Eritrea's successes in the intellectual sphere. First, however, I note the essay's limits.

## BACKGROUND

Some might ask what a survey study can add to a discussion of the social experiments of insurgent Eritrea that can now draw on, and reinforce, a full-fledged state. Is this essay a mere storyteller's impulse? Do hindsight and the apparent fit between theory and praxis make revisionism so attractive as to be unavoidable? My retort to the latter offers a window on the former. Eritrea's "small war" spawned a huge debate, and it is worthwhile to bring together the associated literature as well as to revisit some of the issues. With Eritrea's successes came the burdens that remain today. We must reappraise some of what has been assumed, in thought and practice, in light of Eritrea's changed circumstances, filling the lacunae made imperative by warfare but also without merely repeating already existent work.

What follows, then, is not so much a discussion of the Eritrean insurgency or the nationalist ferment that informed it, but a commentary on the discourse generated by both issues in the 1970s and 1980s. I do not intend to cover the entire large body of literature on this period. For example, I do not specifically explore Ethiopian counterpoints to the Eritrea debate (e.g. Erlich, 1983), as such discussions would divert the focus of this essay. My goal is modest; by a critical interpretive survey of the literature, I seek to shed some new light on how social facts were constructed, acted upon, refined, and projected in the pursuit of Eritrean nation-making approximately from 1970 to 1991. I set the terminal date at 1991 for two main reasons. First, the end of hostilities in May of that year not only opened opportunities for new forms of public engagement. It lent fresh authenticity to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the faction that won in the round of fighting among the nationalists that began in the late 1970s, and took control of all of insurgent Eritrea in 1981. Second, some issues related to contestation of the EPLF regime have deep roots that were sure to re-arise once the cloud of war had passed. Thus, identity construction in post-1991 Eritrea is surely modifying these old structures in new and unfolding contexts. Discussion of these issues deserves a separate essay.

This essay has two main focuses. First, I synthesize and discuss some of the themes and attributes of discourses during the wholesale "re-definition" of Eritrea. Second, I explore how politics, polemics, and epistemes blend (or had been mixed) in the historiography. Central to both tasks is the need to highlight

issues that have been ignored or discarded because (or in spite) of the splits in nationalist ranks. This approach should not only unearth some of the latent assumptions of memory and discourse, but also close the gaps between these assumptions and the history of the Eritrea campaign.

Nationalism has had a long and winding history in Eritrea, where protracted encounters with external interests have sown and sprouted nationalist seeds. Italian colonial rule (1890–1941) brought an anti-colonial phase of nationalism that resembled those in various other colonial locales. However, after WWII, a mix of Allied Powers maneuvering and local discontent brought forth new, ominous sprouts. The United Nations (UN) intervened, helping to dispose of Eritrea by making it Ethiopia's fourteenth province. This "federal solution" was doomed to failure. It fell short of Ethiopia's quest for a full merger and did not match the wishes of many Eritreans. As Duncan Cumming, Chief Administrator of Eritrea in the last year of British rule (1951–1952), wrote:

None of the Eritrean political parties had previously proposed federation with Ethiopia, and the federal conception was so foreign to them that none of the vernacular languages of the country contained a word which accurately conveyed its meaning. (Cumming, 1953: 26)

The "federation" no one wished for did garner deep support from some Eritreans, dividing Eritrea. On the opposing side, a few militants launched armed attacks against Ethiopian symbols in Eritrea's Moslem lowlands. The first shots are believed to have been fired in September 1961. Although the shots barely reached beyond the firing range, they had a powerful symbolic impact, arousing nationalist passions that would fuel a 30-year armed struggle that today looms large in the identity of Eritrea. One decade after the insurgency began, its organizational anchor, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), split in two. Intense competition and turf wars with the rival EPLF eventually dissipated nationalist energies, with the factions eventually reaching a point of zero-sum outcomes (Pool, 1983; Markakis, 1987: 109ff.). After defeating the ELF in 1981, the EPLF dominated the final stages of the campaign as well as the form and character of its denouement. This may help explain why much of the literature on post-1970 Eritrea is replete with romantic images of EPLF, and why observers had thought that Eritrea's independence was certain under the EPLF's watch. The current challenge is to reach beyond idealized notions of Eritrea and to bring greater dispassion and rigor to the analysis of its nation-making experience. In both cases, some of the categories employed in the Eritrea debate must be deconstructed.

For example, the established axiom is that a composite Eritrean identity emerged (or to borrow from Cliffe [1989], was "forged") from war-induced hardship. However, the facts also suggest a variegated and multi-layered underlying discourse. Until the late 1960s, Western-style intellectual engagement with the Eritrean insurgency was fleeting; subsequent intensified guerilla activity and the founding of the EPLF brought expanded commentary, fueling and fueled

by a huge knowledge-production program. The latter brought forth a body of thought, symbols, and narratives on Eritrean nationalism. Some have depicted this body as an organic whole, or the cultural as well as the historical fountain from which all Eritreans have drunk and will drink, irrespective of their social background, vocation, or idiosyncrasy. But others have seen the corpus in its elements, as particular or social constructions of Eritrea's past and future that are open to sharply divergent interpretations (Harnet, 1983/1984; Araya, 1990; Woldemikael, 1993).

Identity paradigms can spark contention in conditions of rapid and/or fundamental change. Every social revolution needs its own history, symbols, and rituals, all of which must be abstracted from conflicting interests and experiences (cf. Kaschuba, 2000). In these terms, Eritrea's universes are partial: "they reflect only part of the total experiences of [Eritreans] and they are filtered by the subjective processes of self-selection" (Hodder-Williams, 1989: 197). Despite this partiality, Eritrean discourses closely approximate what Farley (1996: 4) called "pure presence: [a] ... total, comprehensive, unambiguous presencing of reality." Thus, although a plurality of primordial views, interests, and meanings is readily acknowledged, the quest for "an utterly perfect, transparently true version of [Eritrean] history" (Farley, 1996: 9) has long been an overriding article of faith. Decades after the flawed "federation" experienced troubles, Eritrean intellectuals had yet to come to terms with some of its basics. Tekle (1964) argued that Eritrea's natural home was in Ethiopia. Yohannes (1987) agreed with Cumming (1953) that no one had wanted a "federation," but Araya (1990: 87, 90, 94) suggested this meant that local forces had no control over their own history. Negash (1997) reopened the debate, prompting Fessehatzion (1997, 1998; cf. Markakis, 1998) to caricature "the 'federal experience' that never was."

Here lies the origin of what I call *voix Érythrée*, a uniform and unitary depiction of Eritrean identity and the nationalist agenda that has been predominant since c.1978. As argued below, *voix Érythrée* was not founded on free-flowing debate; it has thrived on discourses essentialized in either-or, we-they terms. Heterodoxy was not highly valued; hence, viewpoints contrary to the prevailing official thinking or arguments on its margins were consistently spurned, discounted, de-legitimized, or demonized. Knowledge claims and identity parameters were also moved back and forth between their micro- (or sub-group) foundations, on the one hand, and macro- (or inclusive) contexts and meanings on the other. All this made it relatively easy for dominant groups to claim that their ideas applied across the social spectrum. However, nearly all groups tended to keep away from debate on the constitution of the Eritrean national self. A doctrinaire bias against dialogue thus appears to be deeply ingrained in the political culture.

A few illustrations help clarify this point. For much of the period under review, the ELF and EPLF (and relations between them) were presented as mutually exclusive and apolitical. This shielded leaders and their choices from criticism as it rejected partisan politics, denied that change agents ultimately are self-interested actors,<sup>(3)</sup> and repudiated basic continuities in ELF and EPLF per-

sonas, as well as experiences. Above all, such claims made contrived processes seem inevitable and immanent. Thus, in their essences, Eritrean nationalist thought and praxis was long bound to “rites of power” (Kertzer, 1988). As of 1991, Eritrea appeared far more inclined to savor its new status than to face up to some of the burdens of its most recent past. A case in point is the response to Ethiopia’s legacy in Eritrea.

Ethiopian presence in Eritrea is a complex subject, and its legacies are certainly not yet cast in stone. As of mid-1991, much still depended on what Eritrea made – or failed to make – of what Iyob (1993; 1995: 26–28) has called Ethiopia’s “regime of truth.” This refers to a corpus of historical and other constructs from which Addis Ababa had defined its own role in the Horn region and hence its place in Eritrea. Politicians as well as scholars have long cherry-picked constructs; those on the ideological right grounded Ethiopia’s “big brother” role in myth and antiquity, while those on the left trained their sights on colonialism, capitalism, and self-determination. The whole range of views found voice among Eritreans; but a shift to the left in the late 1970s saw Eritrea share a common cause with radicals in Ethiopia. Some would claim that the EPLF helped found the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), the militia based in the north that would dominate the government in post-1991 Ethiopia. Others have seen the EPLF as nothing more than an arm of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP).

A series of setbacks in the 1980s dimmed the power of Ethiopia as a “big neighbor.” By 1991, the political value of its “regime of truth” had dipped even lower. As Iyob (1993) has illustrated, the denouement of Eritrea’s campaign reflected the myths of Africa’s founding fathers, the boundaries that they inherited in the 1960s, and the very essence of the “state” shown by map boundaries. The problem, though, was that Ethiopia’s “regime of truth” reached much deeper. It extended to how Eritreans imagined one another and how they related with the EPLF, the ELF, and Ethiopia. Thus, the changes necessary for a free Eritrea could have originated at home. But did they?

The complete answer to this question is beyond the scope of this essay, but two points are worth making. First, “extroversion” had some appeal to the EPLF. A hobbled Ethiopia not only offered much to pick and choose from; its strategic role of regional hegemon could also be up for grabs. Strategists in Asmara never quite stated this as an official policy goal, but, still, fears of chaos in Ethiopia, its effects on the region, and the role(s) that Eritrea could play in such a scenario encouraged the outside donor community to shy away from Eritrea, or to at least show empathy for its positions on the Horn.

Second, Eritrean residents had rising expectations, but EPLF control was set to expand. The local opposition had long been in ruins, its essence suppressed as much by war as by internal habits. Few expected it to recover its voice or develop a new voice soon. As a result, free Eritrea’s early moves were far more interesting for their novelty than for making a real difference. In regional and domestic matters, the EPLF was free to set the agenda and its own pace. Ethiopia’s “regime of truth” reemerged stealthily, but Eritrea did not readily

acknowledge this influence as a major element in the constitution of its “new” self. The discursive equilibrium established after the ELF’s unwilling exit one decade earlier from the homeland changed little, if at all.

In the next section, I examine contrasts and continuities in the constructions of the Fronts. I also discuss how ELF–EPLF schisms affected, and were in turn affected by, the wider Eritrea debate. These factors contributed to the backdrop of the reconstitution of the campaign, as examined in previous sections outlines changes in the political environment from the early to mid-1970s when the insurgency attracted followers from among Eritreans who had long been neutral or undecided. Those changes, I shall show, not only marked the rise of *voix Érythrée* at home, but also abroad. The social origins of a bloc of converts made the slant of *voix Érythrée a fait accompli*.

## CHARACTERIZING THE FRONTS

The Eritrea campaign comprised two “wars”: one by the Fronts and the other by intellectuals. It is unclear which was the primary war, but battles for the hearts and minds of Eritreans were fought in the world at large as well as at home. Western-style discourse emerged in the 1970s, close on the heels of the founding of the EPLF’s, but at least one decade after the first shots were fired.<sup>(4)</sup> This time lag is both an explanation and an analytic puzzle that can shed some light on the campaign’s beginnings.

For example, the insurgency began with “hit and run skirmishes” (ELF, 1977: 106) that were largely unknown. At that time, “the ELF comprised only a handful of fighters and their military activities reflected their size and rural base of operations” (Pool, 1980: 40; 1988: 33; Abir, 1972: 5; Pliny the Middle-aged, 1978: 37; Markakis, 1988: 55). It is also unclear to what extent the ELF *realpolitik* shaped the perceptions of the campaign around the world. Questions remain about the appropriation of the campaign’s initial symbols and payoffs. Just how had militant activism in the rural lowlands come to seize all of Eritrea? Who had managed the transition from one to the other, and how?

Some answers can be found in *Nehnan Elamanan* (lit. Our struggle and its goals), a manifesto issued anonymously in 1970 but usually attributed to Isaias Afewerki, then a rising political star who would become EPLF Secretary General. *Nehnan Elamanan* emerged immediately after Addis Ababa’s first show of weakness since the beginning of the insurgency and after ELF ranks had been rocked by claims of discrimination against Christian recruits from the highlands. That *Nehnan Elamanan* spoke up for victims of perceived duplicity on the part of the ELF may have lent the manifesto a subtle ethnic slant but its critique was transcendent. Partisans of the campaign, the document stated, were neither Christians nor Moslems; they were only Eritreans keen to free their homeland from all forms of domination. The new supra-religious identity construct not only challenged the sitting ELF leadership, which had long relied on the Arab world for support; it also afforded new tools for analysis of



Eritrea. For some (e.g., Kaplan, 1988), this would make EPLF an exemplar of godless materialism and human rights abuses, all of which would turn away pro-Western observers, as well as sympathy, until the 1980s. For others, the ideological spin-off from the new construct set the EPLF apart from the ELF. As of the 1980s, according to Gebre-Medhin (1984: 50), there had been:

two qualitative phases in Eritrean national politics. The first phase [began] in 1941 as parliamentary politics developed into the clandestine political opposition in the 1950s and [ended] with the beginning of armed struggle in 1961. The second phase [began] in 1970 with the formation of the EPLF and [matured] in 1977 with the announcement by the Front of the National Democratic Programme.

Gebre-Medhin focused on the “class content” of Eritrea’s independence struggle; hence, his categories are drawn more tightly than those by scholars such as Bereketab (2000), which are based on looser criteria. For example, the first decade of the insurgency (1961–1970) is missing from Gebre-Medhin’s timeline. This lacuna may or may not have been intentional, but it has various forms as well as deep significance. Because of such gaps, analyses of Eritrea have often failed to directly address questions about the early phase of the insurgency, and its implications; instead, they have offered two conceptual-analytic strategies. One has been to disentangle what Pool (1998: 23; italics added) called “the basic rationale of *any* armed struggle: *military* victories” from *social-institutional* engineering. The other strategy has involved a deft interpretation of (and/or extrapolation between) the records of the ELF and EPLF. Together, both strategies have defined *voix Érythrée* as a body of thought. Wittingly or unwittingly, these approaches have aimed to “capture” discursive space for, or on behalf of, the EPLF, and to make the ELF the most significant other in liberationist discourse—on a par with, or nearly as externalized as, imperial Ethiopia.

Illustrations are readily available. Gebre-Medhin (1984: 49–50) considered the early ELF as a “pre-1961 Eritrean history” redux; through its first decade, he argued, the armed struggle did not bring about “a qualitative break in the struggle for independence.” Markakis (1987: 116) blamed this failure on “the political immaturity and organizational nebulosity of the ELF” during the 1960s. The views of Zemheret Yohannes, an ELF partisan turned EPLF council member, are more pointed still.<sup>(5)</sup> According to Yohannes (Wilson, 1991: 200n),

The experience of the ELF can be divided into two basic stages: first 1961 to 1970 and second 1970 to 1981. In the first stage the ELF was not an organisation in the strict sense... it did not have a democratically elected leadership, it did not have a clearly drawn political line or organisational constitution... After the split in 1970 and the establishment of the EPLF, the ruling circle of the ELF were compelled by the new development to make political concessions.

Yohannes and Gebre-Medhin were not alone in doubting the ELF's bona fides. Sherman (1980: 49–54; 1978; cf. Bhardwaj, 1979) noted that the ELF lost the battle for innovative “social programming” and only reacted case-by-case to the EPLF. Iyob (1995: 120, 121) argued that the ELF was so “mired in personalism, patronage and power struggles” that by the 1970s it had no capacity or will to lead. For Bereketeab (2000: 196), this spoke to an unreconstructed ELF that embodied too much “spontaneity and preoccupation with military priorities” and too little “comprehensive, clearly thought out plan-of-action.” According to Tseggai (1988: 76),

The ELF, although created out of a need to preserve the national entity of Eritrea, was led by self-styled leaders, residing abroad, whose aim was to set-up a neo-colonial state in Eritrea through armed struggle. As such, the ELF lacked a clear ideological line, and a political programme that could safeguard the interests of the oppressed majority of Eritreans. Instead, through its organizational structure and its style of work, the ELF fostered religious antagonism and fanned backward differences and sentiments, of a regional and ethnic nature...to assert its leadership.

Characterizing the ELF as the once-apparent solution that turned into a major obstacle has some merit. Not only did the ELF force a rethinking of center-periphery relations on Ethiopia (cf. Bell, 1974: 445); its partisans had taken up arms against the empire just as Eritrea's unconditional membership in it seemed to be a *fait accompli*. Instead, the ELF split down the middle, with its founders apparently overwhelmed in the aftermath of their initial successes. Still, organizational and philosophical distinctions between the Fronts were more complex than shown by dominant accounts. According to Harnet (1983/1984: 10–11; cf. Woldemikael, 1991: 35–36; de Waal, 1992: 374),

Organizationally, the E.L.F. [was] loose and tolerate[d] democratic expression of opinions; at times this “democratic toleration” [had turned] out to be a fertile ground for adventurous, spontaneous movements which play[ed] into the hands of rightist and leftist opportunists. The E.P.L.F. [was] a solid organization with no democratic rights; it [was] characterized by a strict military discipline whose underlying sanction [was] fear of ruthless punishment... For the E.P.L.F., the broad masses [were] just like clay which [had] to be moulded, willy-nilly, as it [saw] fit.

Tseggai's position on “a clear ideological line” is widely shared (cf. Machida, 1987; Gebre-Medhin, 1989: 172–174; Iyob, 1995: 109–116), but nonetheless problematic. It ignores key considerations beyond ELF control during the 1960s, such as disparate Arab responses to apparent ideological-strategic shifts within the Eritrean nationalist movement in the late 1960s, and Ethiopia's lobbying efforts around the world to isolate ELF leaders-in-exile from rank-and-file fighters at home. Also flawed are the links that Tseggai established between



ELF leaders' residence and legitimacy and the organization's performance. Most troubling is Tseggai's circular argument that EPLF ideological success is the one major attribute that the ELF did not have. This reasoning may reflect the permissive use of concepts during the insurgency, but it makes the argument irrefutable.

A more realistic position is that ELF activity was affected by EPLF competition in the ideological realm. As myths and as frameworks of thought and action, ideologies can often become frozen as constructed, self-reinforcing "realities," thus creating captive audiences and reducing the opportunity costs of pragmatic solutions (cf. Pool, 1980: 45; 1998: 23n; Markakis, 1988: 64–65). The main elements of what would become the dominant view emerged during the 1960s; yet, how to realize and sustain the dominant view without crushing Eritrea's socio-cultural "heterogeneities" remained a point of contention throughout the 1970s. In this light, Pool's (1980: 40) view on "the failure of ELF to transform as it expanded" is of limited use.<sup>(6)</sup> Such arguments in effect blame the ELF for not having supplanted itself wholesale.

More crucial than the ELF itself are the dialectics of being and becoming. Self-transcendence and self-regeneration can be difficult, and were most certainly so in insurgent Eritrea, given the near total lack of agreed-upon rules and low social capital. In this context, the ELF's difficulties derived from two main sources. The first concerned cognitive as well as structural dissonance at the collective organizational level and concurrent pressure for micro-group and personal survival within the movement. The second was intense competition for power and for ultimate control over the values and strategies of Eritrean nationalism.

There was little room for political maneuvering in this framework. Many strategic options that observers have taken for granted *post hoc* since the 1980s did not exist in the same form during the 1960s. It is also unclear whether, with a less cloudy horizon, ELF leaders would have considered such options politically rational and acceptable (Markakis, 1987: 115; Iyob, 1995: 110). The most acclaimed options centered on perceived lapses in early ELF tactics and strategies, and on the grip of the "more ideologically self-conscious and radical faction" (Young, 1983: 215). Members of this faction gravitated to the EPLF and turned it into a formidable military as well as social force; EPLF actions, in turn, reinforced well-honed but controversial accounts of ELF decline. One question, however, has not been addressed: Why did the intelligentsia not join the armed struggle until its second decade?

The answers lie in ELF-society interfaces, particularly in social constructions of religion that tended to align Eritrea's Western-style intellectuals against the ELF. The literature provides two main perspectives on this issue. The first emphasizes Eritrea's record of sectarianism and antagonisms between Muslims and Christians during the 1940s that bifurcated politics along these religious lines (cf. Ellingson, 1977). Stephen Longrigg, Eritrea's Chief Administrator in 1942–44 and author of *A Short History of Eritrea* (1945), took this view. In May 1946, shortly after leaving his post, Longrigg (1946: 126) told the Royal

Empire Society that in Eritrea,

(the) Muslim population – half the total, and occupying some seven-eighths of the land-surface – have no conception ... of a united Eritrea, and no sense of solidarity with the Christians on the plateau ... From Ethiopia [the Muslims] are divided by religion, and by memories of many brutal slave-raids and cattle-drives in the past.

Fifty years later, Negash (1997: 150–158) continued to insist that religious beliefs had not only underscored Eritrean political praxis through the federation period (1952–62), but that social divisions in their wake had provided the backdrop for internal strife during the 1970s.

The second school of thought emphasizes the material bases of inter-group relations. Pool (1980; 1983: 175) located such social antagonisms in Eritrea in the “differential transformation of a society divided between pastoralist and peasant.” Markakis (1988: 52) concurred, noting that while “Muslim pastoralists on the lowlands and Christian peasants on the plateau had never been good neighbours ... the reason was a perennial competition for land, not the difference in faith.” From this viewpoint, religion has had a far more instrumental value as a mask for the competition for mundane rewards.

No one viewpoint can offer a complete picture. Both of the above views include some generalized fear of religious sectarianism and how such sectarianism might affect Eritrea’s multi-faith society. Proponents of bifurcation may have overstated their case, but certainly religion has deeply influenced society and politics in modern Eritrea. Until the 1970s, confessional differences had tended to coincide with geo-ethnic as well as political boundaries (Pool, 1983: 184–188; Iyob, 1995: 108–135). With roots in the Moslem lowlands, the ELF was associated with non-secular politics; in contrast, the EPLF drew its core support from the Christian highlands. Although “a majority of its cadres were Tigrinya, [the EPLF had] presented a balance between the nationalities and religious groups in its leadership” (Cliffe, 1989: 137, 140; cf. Markakis, 1988: 64; Woldemikael, 1991: 34–35).

On the other hand, what one might call “ethno-religious balancing” is not new. Nor is it original to the EPLF. Cliffe (1989: 134) noted that the “counter-tradition of non-sectarian politics within Eritrean nationalism” dates back to the 1940s and was maintained by the ELF. As such, strictly bipolar conceptions of Eritrean political life present a false picture. During the 1960s, many in the highlands touted historic links with northern Ethiopia. The highlands area housed the largest concentration of economic infrastructure in Eritrea and produced the upper crust of the intelligentsia (cf. Araya, 1990: 95–96). The specific geographic interests and characteristics help explain why the first shots against imperial rule rang out in the lowlands and why the highlands contained little early support for revolt.

## RECONFIGURING THE STRUGGLE

Eritrea presents clear examples of social conditions and interests that were shaped and reshaped by political identities. However, the literature has little to say about how competing identity paradigms intertwined with shifts in strategy and tactics during the Eritrea campaign. To illustrate, I look at the nuances of the production and dissemination of information on the early campaign in the West. According to Bell (1974: 429 note):

There is not now, or likely to be in the immediate future, an authoritative study of the Eritrean insurrection. ELF exiles are not particularly knowledgeable, and the shifta<sup>(7)</sup> are not inclined to written records. The Ethiopians generally prefer to discuss other matters and it is doubtful if a definitive internal chronicle exists... In general the printed word is the result of transient [especially journalistic] exposure to the crisis, often excellent but seldom analytical...

Bell dismissed potential ELF discourses in a brief footnote and presented a psycho-cultural slant to his views. However, he did foreshadow dyadic constructs of Eritrea. For Bell, Eritrea's was not so much a campaign for self-determination as a "protracted insurrection ... drifting through cycles of violence and quiescence" because it had been "authorized by history and habit" (Bell, 1974: 428, 429, 444). Bell conceded that Ethiopia's ruling elites had long expressed impolitic views of "minor" cultures. It is no wonder that Gebre-Medhin (1976: 54) argued that "endemic insurgency" and similar categories "deny the real issues"; in other words, those seeking a clearer understanding must look elsewhere. Medhanie (1987; 1989; 1994a) articulated ELF perspectives on the struggle, prompting an EPLF rebuttal in at least one case (EPLF Bureau of Foreign Relations, 1987). However, the Eritrean view has been that Bell's prognosis was misdirected.

However, Bell had, in effect, dragged Eritrean nationalism under the looking glass. His scathing criticism of ELF also highlighted two important issues. First, insider accounts of Eritrea's armed struggle were rare, and perhaps non-existent, in the West throughout the 1960s, leading to Bell's second point that Western observers had been slow to grasp the "real issues" or dimensions of the conflict. This could have led to greater empathy induced by self-generated information. Given conditions in Eritrea in early- to mid-1970s, Bell's concerns also hinted at important distinctions within the nationalist movement, between its views and the preferences of its factions, and among the factions. The ELF's crisis was still unfolding, but what organizational form it would take was of great importance. Lobban (1976: 314, note 8) argued, for instance, that "the ELF position is not as widely known in the [United States, hence] the PLF [Popular Liberation Forces, led by Osman Sabbe] is usually thought to be the major force." This and the criticism that trailed Bell's and Medhanie's views suggest that disaggregated analytic categories do have political credence.

Bell's latent advocacy would soon permeate nationalist thinking. But the response would not illuminate the history of the ELF's struggle; it would mold the building blocks of *voix Érythrée*. From the mid-1970s, the dominant discourse emphasized the world's ignorance, misreading, and/or distortion of Eritrea's national history. It also rejected backward traditions at sub-national levels and asserted the virtues of the new, all-inclusive view of the insurgency (Gebre-Medhin, 1976). Ironically, converts to the new episteme in effect confirmed some of Bell's claims regarding the ELF. Much of the revalidation was circuitous and understated, but it lent new credence to Bell's views, which had drawn criticism from both sides in the Eritrea debate.

Bell's analysis differed from the norm in other ways as well. He was much less concerned with mischief from outside Eritrea than with considerations internal to the nationalist movement. For example, during the 1960s, few intellectuals could present the ELF's cause in terms intelligible outside the Arab world. This reflected the deep resistance to Western culture in the society from which the ELF had sprung. Reinforced by the radical Arab regimes from which it drew support, the ELF wanted to check the creeping influx of Westernization; however, this led to a frozen mind-set in which all Westerners were "imperialist," unsympathetic, and not worth courting. Such rigidity made the ELF both insular and easy prey for counter-propaganda from all sides. As far as Ethiopia was concerned, the ELF's large Islamic support base was proof that the Eritrean insurgency belonged among Arab-led plots to turn the African Horn to Islam or at least strip off Ethiopia's Christian identity and traditions. From within the nationalist movement, ELF social practices were labeled "backward" and "archaic" and more inclined toward ethnicity and regionalism than to the emergent Eritrean nation. Public discourse was also couched in loud, sharp terms to mirror ELF-EPLF competition in the 1970s (see Gebre-Medhin, 1976: 60; 1982/1983; 1989: 182–188; Tseggai, 1976; 1988). All of this left the ELF in a vicious circle in which its identity parameters stoked fear mongering by Ethiopia, which, in turn, created a climate that cost the ELF support from within Eritrea and the West.

The campaign was reconfigured against this background. To avoid potential dysfunction caused by religious interests, the EPLF built on the supra-religious postulates in *Nehnan Elamanan* and eventually supported a strategic de-linking of religion from political society (Makki, 1996: 483; Pool, 1998: 21). From the mid-1970s, ethno-confessional and socio-economic differences, efforts to transcend them or at least contain their impact on inter-group relations, or the apparent lack of such commitment would all signify a new left-right ideological divide in the nationalist movement. In this framework, the ELF was a zealous prisoner to regional history and sub-national interests, unwilling to accept on equal terms the highland Christians who had swollen its ranks from the mid-1960s, yet unable to articulate requisite changes to push forward the struggle. In contrast, the EPLF had "successfully transcended parochial divisions and narrow agendas" (Iyob, 1995: 122) or spoke to and/or embodied a corporatist unity of the nation, the revolution, and the vanguard (cf. Pool, 1998: 20; on corporatism,

see Nyang'oro & Shaw, 1989).

Other observers have depicted the EPLF in more precise terms. Swayed largely by its centralized structure and radical public rhetoric, analysts of gender relations, land reform, and the social sector generally have seen the EPLF as Marxist, as well as radical enough to seek an overturn of society (see Wilson, 1991; Magos, 1981; Gebre-Medhin, 1982/1983; 1989; Silkin, 1983; Sherman, 1978; 1980; cf. Johnson, 1981). In *The Challenge Road: Women and the Eritrean Revolution*, for example, Wilson (1991: 55–56, 132) suggested that individuals, families, and “all ... other identities” faced collapse in areas under EPLF control. This was a result of the EPLF’s careful mix of efforts to institute Gramscian “auto-reflection” by individuals, with generous support for oppressed groups. According to Wilson (1991: 116; cf. Silkin, 1983: 912–913), the EPLF’s immediate goals were less to create a socialist society than to “destroy feudal forms of production” leading to “a fundamental transformation which both enables and secures social and ideological changes.” Hence, peasants who had waged lifelong battles with the landed gentry and women resisting male domination flocked to EPLF. This spoke as much to the EPLF’s egalitarian promise as it did the ELF’s “ethnic chauvinism” (Wilson, 1991: 90–91).

The EPLF had shown great potential. However, Wilson may have read too much social capital accumulation and/or altruism into what was a shrewd strategy for self-preservation. As Pateman (1990a: 471) noted, egalitarian practices “proved to be the most effective way of attracting and keeping the loyalty of [EPLF] supporters, and, in general, of organizing a revolution.” But beyond that survival instinct, not much seemed sacrosanct. Thus, despite its claims on gender equality, no women sat on the EPLF’s governing council until 1987. Upon the election of women to the Central Committee in March of that year, General Secretary Isaias Afeworki voiced his desire that the six new female members would approach their new role “*not as women*” (1987: 28, italics added). In an apparent insight on the EPLF’s lack of action on gender rhetoric, Afeworki hinted at a shortage of suitable female candidates. Gender could not be so urgent when so much was yet “to be done to create competent cadres who can shoulder responsibility at Central Committee level ... instead of having a symbolic representation.” Is “real” representation gender-free and should it be? Or is social class gender-blind?

The answers could go either way. Meanwhile, female members of EPLF politburo needed to deny their natural selves to partake in their own liberation. At the least, they had to accept male-inclined constructions of their place in the EPLF. Despite this patronizing situation, Afeworki’s riposte on gender had deep resonance in an organization long used to obeisance from its members and affiliates. The “national unions” of women, youths, and peasants – to cite but the most obvious examples – had been remarkably instrumental in their mobilization. However, the core value of such constituents lay in how they helped reduce the EPLF’s transaction costs (and much less so those of the ELF) by their access to scarce materials and symbolic resources based in “civil society” (NUEW, 1985; cf. Iyob, 1995: 128ff.). The question therefore is whether the

popular, egalitarian, and corporatist slants of EPLF programs would (or could) last beyond the insurgency.

Corporatism is not synonymous with socialism. EPLF spokespersons also often denied the group's socialist leanings (Pliny the Middle-aged, 1978: 44). Gebre-Medhin (1984) argued that the socialist slant of the National Democratic Program, enunciated in 1977, set the EPLF apart from the ELF; however, the distinction became worn thin in the 1980s (EPLF, 1977; 1987). In 1984 while he was Assistant General Secretary, Afeworki had acknowledged that the EPLF preferred "the general socialist trend" in the Third World, but he offered no details (Firebrace & Holland, 1984: 131). Three years later when he took the top post, Afeworki stated categorically that a future Eritrean state "will face difficulties in giving a house to everybody"; hence, it must allow "people to have some kind of private property" (Afeworki, 1987: 25; cf. Kaplan, 1988: 65; Connell, 1993: 23–25).

The lesson is that ideological claims are a poor gauge of an organization's character. In Eritrea, each front continued to self-aggrandize among its "pronounced regional clientele and orbit of operation" (Young, 1983: 220) while playing at the proverbial "civilizing mission" with regard to the other Front's constituency. Eritrea-wide considerations also did not necessarily take precedence over (or for that matter displace) the Fronts' respective outlooks and preferences (Harnet, 1983/1984: 9–11; Markakis, 1988: 52–53; Araya, 1990: 89–91). Observers appeared to have been so charmed by the Fronts' various rhetoric on social matters and by their military successes in the 1970s that they missed the importance of such descriptive terms as "incorporation," "co-optation," and "organizing" that recurred in the Fronts' literature (cf. Styan, 1996; Pateman, 1990 [1998]; and Pool, 1998).

In retrospect, the ELF was less adept in politicking. Its leaders not only failed to notice declining support for the imperial order on the Eritrean plateau; they also could not exploit subsequent shifts in allegiances in the former unionist heartland. From the early 1960s, political groups in the highlands began to see their perceived influence on the Addis Ababa government diminish; the imposition of Amharic as official language also entailed "enforced assimilation and repression of culture" (Cliffe, 1989: 136). These and other sources of political alienation in the highlands drew Christians to the ELF. Yet, until 1969, the ELF did very little to "integrate" the new recruits or to adjust existing structures and procedures in view of its expanded social bases (Markakis, 1988: 58; Pool, 1980: 34). Increased guerilla activity helped transform a once small, "hidden war" into a full-fledged rebellion; it also jolted long-held perceptions of imperial Ethiopia in the West.

Notwithstanding, ELF leaders were increasingly unable to articulate the struggle in their own terms or to sway the wider discourse in its wake.<sup>(8)</sup> Challenged by younger, "well educated, often ideologically radical, and mainly Christian elements" (Young, 1983: 216), the ELF establishment resorted to traditional tactics to re-assert its authority. Dissident groups sought to maximize their growing bargaining power; at various times they refused to alter their position, stalled at



reconciliation, or altered the criteria to suit their needs. With the ELF reacting in kind, a seemingly innocuous quarrel over social and military strategy soon produced a clear fissure in the movement (Harnet, 1983/1984: 8–10; cf. Pliny the Middle-aged, 1978: 38f).

Attempts by the ELF to crush dissidence or neutralize its proponents now seem counterproductive, but this does not mean that they were unusual. Power does not itself self-destruct; only power-holders do. Power-wielders are also likely to agree to co-opt new demands rather than to dilute (or, worse still, change) their organization's identity parameters.<sup>(9)</sup> In conditions of weak institutionalization, new demands could create pressure points that could in turn undermine the authority of leaders and/or the social order. Or they could foster a climate of social inertia, produce recurrent struggles for supremacy, and/or create cycles of renewal and decay. In this context, the ELF's lag behind the EPLF spoke to the "murky and complex political situation" in Eritrea throughout the 1970s (Pliny the Middle-aged, 1978: 37n); to high stakes in the then-uncertain future of the liberation campaign; and to sharp differences of vision and strategy between the Fronts. Other groups were not immune from the same pressures; but even those that had become cynical about the "civil war" joined to build pressure on both Fronts for a rapprochement.

#### COLLAPSE OF LOCAL CYNICISM

The quest for a *détente* during the 1970s centered on three main factors. The first was the desire by ELF leaders to retain hands-on control of the nation-making process. The logic of this quest is as follows. The insurgency had resulted "from [the] anger of coastal Tigrai Muslims at being coerced into an essentially Amharic Christian unitary state" (Young, 1983: 220). The ELF was the natural home for these initiators. However, early signals from outside the lowlands were ambiguous. There were hints that any payoffs from the initial fights could be watered down or eroded wholesale. To pre-empt such developments and keep with the ideals of the insurgency's founding fathers, the argument went, the ELF needed to provide the leadership for the campaign.

Such ideas were not free from criticism. Arab support for the ELF, or propaganda arising from such support, did not endear the ELF to all. Among highland elites, a secular Eritrea was an irreducible minimum, but few would have trusted the ELF to bring such a state into being. For many, an Eritrean state run according to Islamic precepts portended a cultural backlash against Christians or the loss of Christians' putative socio-economic advantage. Memories of ELF bias during the 1960s both heightened such fears and made the prospect of political control from Addis Ababa a less frightening option among Eritrea's highlanders (Geremay, 1971: 26). Rapprochement between the ELF and EPLF was also unattractive.

Ethiopia was the third factor in the quest for *détente*. Dramatic changes had taken place in the 1970s, but these changes ensured Ethiopia's place in the

making of *voix Érythrée* rather than weakened it. Before his overthrow, the Emperor Haile Selassie had long exploited Eritrea's internal cleavages (Markakis, 1987: 121ff, 144–145; Negash, 1997: 148–153; Iyob, 1995: 101–107). After long casting the ELF as a fringe body in search of a lost cause, the imperial regime had from the late 1960s combined violent repression in rural Eritrea with a “hearts-and-minds program” in urban centers (Bell, 1974: 433, 443; cf. Hanson, 1969: 4; Selassie, 1980: 66–67; Giorgis, 1989: 81–84; Markakis, 1987: 118–119). The military committee known as the Dergue (Amharic for “committee”) that followed Selassie had, by 1975, squandered much of the political capital accrued from turning the country away from imperial-era divide-and-conquer practices; the Dergue later re-invented itself as a Marxist-socialist régime.

Ethiopia's new ideology helped free long-idle political capital in the region and redirect it into new mobilization strategies. However, it also made ELF-style gradualism passé and raised the stakes for parallel identities in Eritrea. Attempts to run what Young (1983: 216; cf. Pool 1998: 30) called “an embryonic state” in Eritrea's liberated zones were far-reaching,<sup>(10)</sup> but highlighted miniscule rather than real differences between the ELF and EPLF. As Lobban (1976: 342; cf. Harnet, 1983/1984: 10–15) argued, there was more “slogan and rhetoric” than “substantive differences” between the Fronts' platforms; for Sherman (1980: 49–54), the EPLF was “proactive” while the ELF was “reactive.” Logic dictates that EPLF “innovations” may have been “reactions” to ELF adventures, including its mistakes (cf. Harnet, 1983/1984: 10). From the late 1970s, both fronts looked to Ethiopia for rhetoric as well as policy initiatives.

The same doctrine set Ethiopia back and cost it Eritreans' support. In a bid to strengthen their hold on power, elements of the Dergue instituted or at least plotted a campaign to eliminate radical intellectuals and student leaders in Addis Ababa (Clapham, 1988: 51–57, 204–208). The regime's slogan, *Ityopia Tikdem* (lit. Ethiopia first), also implied a territorial vision of Ethiopia that was at odds with its initial claims on internal self-determination. With a command economy and matching rhetoric in place, Ethiopia soon played host to a wave of populist nationalism. The ensuing “revolution” undermined the social-status aspirations of the petty bourgeois and middle classes; it also made victims of Eritreans in the public services and the professions (Giorgis, 1989: 86; Araya, 1990: 97f; Woldemikael, 1991: 38–39). Following attacks on Asmara by both Fronts and by Ethiopian forces in early 1975, Selassie noted (1980: 67; cf. Clapham, 1988: 59), “the armed struggle, which had been confined to the lowlands and to the northern and southern mountains, now reached the gates of Asmara and reverberated throughout [Eritrea], involving the entire population.”

In the 16 months leading up to April 1978, according to the EPLF, “27 members of the EPLF led Association of Eritrean Students were killed, 70 arrested and 1443 were *forced to leave Asmara for the field*” (EPLF, 1982: 211; italics added). The Ethiopian counter-insurgency strategies had backfired dramatically. Not only had the Dergue's practices deepened anti-Ethiopian feeling in Eritrea, they had helped stir up cross-cultural support for a campaign long weighed down by a seemingly parochial slant. The seismic change erupted mainly from

highland Christians, among them public servants, self-employed professionals, and entrepreneurs who had not been opposed to the Eritrean cause *per se* but appeared to have been torn between tacit support for Ethiopian rule and a cynical indifference to the ELF (Chaliand, 1978: 126–128; Cliffe, 1989: 138; Selassie, 1993). The book, *A Painful Season & A Stubborn Hope* (Tesfagiorgis, 1992), a personal narrative on the Eritrea campaign from the perspective of a highland elite, is set in this context. The story begins in early 1975, after attacks on Asmara forced many to take definite sides.

The attacks had prompted a joint response by the ELF and EPLF that rattled the Dergue forces. Both Fronts opted to reject the autonomy offer from Addis Ababa and instead push for no less than a sovereign Eritrea (Lobban, 1976: 343).<sup>(11)</sup> The rare meeting of minds by the Fronts meant, in turn, that Eritreans could no longer sit on the fence. Thus, many elites newly estranged from the Dergue's Ethiopia signed up to join the Fronts in combat or other roles; others went into exile or moved back and forth between roles. Émigrés supported the campaign in various ways. Many helped raise cash and other resources; some helped build on the Marxist-Leninist discourses (Young, 1983: 216); and a few discounted ideology to sell the liberationist paradigm in the West (Kaplan, 1988: 62).

The best known advocates of *voix Érythrée* came from the émigré community and include Asmarom Legesse, Amare Tekle, Araia Tseggai, and Gaim Kebreab – all holders of Ph.D. degrees with substantial publications and public service to their credit.<sup>(12)</sup> Another influential *voix Érythrée* proponent was Kassahun Checole, an academic-turned-publisher. His Red Sea/Africa World Press, which he founded while in exile in the United States, issued much of the material on Eritrea. The most influential proponent may have been Bereket Habte Selassie, a jurist who became Attorney General in Imperial Ethiopia at age 29 and served as Mayor of Harar in the east. After a short stint with the Dergue, Selassie migrated to the United States in the 1970s. From this new base, he worked as an EPLF observer at the UN; as roving ambassador for insurgent Eritrea; and as professor of law and international politics at Howard University. Selassie became the preeminent elder statesman of Eritrean studies in the West and helped put Eritrea at the center of a new liberationist discourse on Africa and the world.

## EMERGENCE OF *VOIX ÉRYTHRÉE*

At its advent in 1978, *voix Érythrée* rested on three waves of commentary. The first consisted of work published from about 1969 to 1975 that brought news of the war in Eritrea to the world. Most reports highlighted the heightened guerilla attacks on economic targets (e.g., railways) or visible regime symbols such Ethiopian Airlines' aircraft, as well as reprisal attacks in rural Eritrea since about 1967. The risk of wider disorder in the Horn and in the Middle East soon after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war also loomed large in the analyses.

Contributors in this group labored under standard assumptions of international relations and state concerns, and as such they tended to look in at Eritrea from the outside. Thus, the crisis was depicted as endemic and the insurgency as “troublesome” (Campbell, 1970; Bell, 1974); other phrasing included “rebellion,” “hidden war,” and plain “fighting” (Geremay, 1971; Hanson, 1969; Halliday, 1971; Abir, 1972; Robbs, 1975).

Other than Bell, whose views I have discussed above, most commentators stopped short of painting a psycho-cultural profile of Eritrean Moslems or of the campaign. However, many seemed to take Ethiopia’s boundaries for granted. Africa’s oldest indigenous state had come to mean so much that questions regarding the expansionist slant of its Eritrea policy went unasked. Of course, there were a few exceptions. Op-ed pieces in the leftist quarterly *Tricontinental* (1969: 30) called attention to the danger of “Ethiopian colonialism,” but rows over ideology meant that such views reached only a restricted audience in the West. Hanson (1969) depicted the United States and Ethiopia as “the new colonialists”; in turn, Robinson (1971) pointed to the “blatant” African-style internal colonialism underway in Eritrea. Robinson also inspired a view that observers looking out from Eritrea would call “Ethiopian-internalist,” which is described further below. In general, the 1960 reports had a bias towards Ethiopia. This preference likely reflects Ethiopia’s deft moves in diplomatic circuits during the period but also the much weaker and ineffectual Eritrean propaganda in the West.

The second wave of commentary emerged around 1976. This wave sought to raise and project Eritrea’s own voices in lands far and near, and centered on “the case for Eritrean national independence” (Tseggai, 1976). Araia Tseggai was the first Eritrean intellectual to make the nationalist case in a Western scholarly journal, *The Black Scholar*, during the period under review.<sup>(13)</sup> Three months later, in September 1976, the *Monthly Review* published a similar account by Yordanos Gebre-Medhin (1976). Both authors sought to disassemble existing theories of the insurgency and pushed Eritrea’s case by affirming the historical, political, and legal bases of its claims against Ethiopia. At this stage, the ELF and EPLF had few apparent differences and few were seeking to define sharper distinctions between the two. Ethiopia’s military regime was still taking shape as of 1975; hopes of a political settlement of the Eritrea problem were high, and Marxism-Leninism had yet to become the doctrine of choice in the region. Yet, change was imminent. Both the ELF and EPLF soon took on Marxist garb, and analyses took on new theoretical and rhetorical flourishes.

*Voix Érythré* came into its own in 1978 with the launch of the third wave of commentary. The swift passage from the second wave reflected changes in intellectual, military, and political aspects of the campaign. Politically, the EPLF had just fallen out with Osman Sabbe’s ELF-PLF. Relations between the EPLF and the larger ELF had been tense. At the same time, Ethiopia was flush with its victory over Somalia in the Ogaden and had wasted no time in exploiting ELF-EPLF schisms. Ethiopia launched a new offensive in 1977–78 that forced Eritrean forces into “strategic retreat,” a euphemism for the loss of liberated

towns. The ELF lost the most ground, making it more prone to internal splits and pressure from the EPLF. Such weaknesses would prove terminal to ELF military capabilities in Eritrea and hasten its *othering* in discourse.

Meanwhile, the intellectual sphere was also experiencing some discord. Early in 1978 a new journal called the *Horn of Africa* was launched with the goal of bringing “a genuine conciliation” in the *Horn* region, including between Ethiopians and Eritreans, by airing “as many arguments on as many sides of a given issue as there are people willing to declare themselves” (Ali, 1978: 3). From April 1978, the journal started publishing numerous articles on Eritrea (Selassie, 1978; Fessehazion, 1978; Sherman, 1978; Bhardwaj, 1979; Voice, 1979; see also Heiden, 1978). Two Eritrean émigré intellectuals, Kassahun Checole and Tekie Fessehazion, became contributing editors to *Horn of Africa* around this time. The journal’s association with Eritrean intellectuals as well as the slant of the material it published attracted comment. From Holland, the EPRP (1981: 49) wrote to criticize the *Horn* for “beautifying certain fronts while attacking others”; and for giving prominence to writers who, in EPRP’s view, were “notorious for their blind adherence to the line and propaganda of the EPLF and TPLF.”

The EPRP’s comment followed closely after some criticism from within. In an editorial, the *Horn*’s Special Correspondents (1981: 7, probably including Dan Connell) acknowledged that, in effect, they might have helped reinforce some myths about the region. Their reports on the refugee situation in the *Horn*, they went on, had “at times [been] impressionistic and ... lacking in certain necessary hard information.” The editorial might have been a confession of sins or a plea for more verifiable research procedures. But it did make a case for a shrewd skepticism on the part of observers of the Horn. To the same extent, the reflective mood at the *Horn* spoke to the increasing analytic angle in work on Eritrea since 1980 (e.g., Markarkis, 1981; Selassie, 1980; Magos, 1981; Checole, 1983a; 1983b).

### VOIX ÉRYTHRÉE: AN OVERVIEW

Three main attributes of the field stand out. First, more of the early output appeared in established leftist or new, left-inclined journals than in the mainstream media. This trend reflected residual Western perceptions of Eritrean “separatism” as well as the ideological slant of early discourse. The *Tricontinental*, a journal based in Havana, Cuba, published statements rebutting claims that Eritrea’s was a case of “secession” but such arguments were suspect in the West. The quarrels would draw in more mainstream media as well as observers. For example, there are interesting parallels to be drawn between Bell’s (1974: 429n) skeptical views on Halliday (1971), and Rentmeesters (1982) critique of Halliday and Molyneux’s *The Ethiopian Revolution*.

Second, most Eritrean observers tried to advance the nationalist cause; however, each work stood alone with regard to substance as well as its analytic

thrust. The earliest efforts were more general and inductive, while subsequent work was empirical-deductive. Nonetheless, few provided any new information on ELF activism during the 1960s. Selassie's *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa* (1980) was a bold attempt at constructing the conceptual and theoretical building blocks of nationalist discourse in the region. Yet as Markakis (1981: 366) noted, the analysis drew far too little from Selassie's inside knowledge of the functioning of the imperial court. Selassie filled some of the gaps in *Riding the Whirlwind* (1993), but in a form that intertwines fact with flights of fictional fancy. As Samantar (1997) showed, this strategy is shrewd but it can leave a reader puzzled.

This leads us to the third defining attribute. *Voix Érythré* had begun with a greater inclination toward intellectual activism than academic practice.<sup>(14)</sup> Its central founding task was to justify EPLF choice objectives, strategies, and tactics, more than to promote open-ended debate. As part of this goal, the EPLF published a handful of in-house newsletters and magazines, such as *Liberation* issued by the Association of Eritrean Students in North America (AESNA), *Adulis*, and *Eritrea Information*, a monthly bulletin issued by the Research and Information Center on Eritrea (RICE), then a clearinghouse for data collected largely by EPLF Research and Public Administration units.

The position and role of RICE expanded considerably over time. It helped feed EPLF values and data into research-based analysis of the insurgency, and issued or prepared material for publication. With its main office then in Rome (Italy), and with branches in major capitals around the world, RICE<sup>(15)</sup> was well primed to influence international opinion on Eritrea. RICE helped arrange visits to nationalist base areas by scholars and journalists from around the world. It also forged informal alliances with activists and non-governmental organizations concerned with the effects of drought and dislocation on civilian populations. The reports and essays informed by organized trips to Eritrea, as well as by other forms of "information streaming," reinforced EPLF positions directly and indirectly. For instance, RICE had prepared *The Eritrean Case* (Permanent Peoples' Tribunal, 1982) from proceedings of the Tribunal's session on Eritrea held in Italy in May 1980. The Rome session offered a platform for collaboration by scholars and activists from across the world that shared an interest in Eritrea's cause, but the Tribunal's opinion may not have had much weight, a suggestion I will return to shortly.

Among the analytic imprints in the RICE series is the *Journal of Eritrean Studies*, based at Michigan State University in the United States. Araia Tseggai, its editor, doubled as RICE Director/Coordinator for North America during the 1980s; in turn, the journal served as a vent for the nationalist fascination with "facts" and the provenance of facts. As Tseggai (1986a: v) wrote, the journal's mission was to "rectify perceived distorted information" about Eritrean history, society, and economy. Thus, in addition to articles and book reviews, the journal published nationalist analyses of declassified archival material as well as other documents obtained under the United States Freedom of Information Act.

The best illustrations of the wider reach and scholarly inclination of the



RICE-EPLF alliance are two volumes published nearly one decade apart. The first is *Behind the War in Eritrea* (Davidson et al., 1980), which was a product of an international symposium organized by the British charity War on Want and held in London in early 1979. The volume's ten essays do have a distinct pro-EPLF slant, however. This reflects the kind of information available to contributors and the fact that Bereket Selassie, the sole Eritrean contributor to the volume, had initiated the symposium. In April 1984, War on Want and the British Labor Party set up a trip to Eritrea for Firebrace and Holland. The title of their report, *Never Kneel Down* (1984), is drawn from a well-known EPLF allegory. The report of a subsequent delegation was published four years later as *Eritrea: Images of War and Peace* (Kinnock, 1988).

The second collection is *The Long Struggle of Eritrea*, also edited by Cliffe and Davidson (1988a). Seven of its nine substantive essays are by non-Eritrean writers, activists, and scholars, a hint that Eritrea's foot soldiers were drawn from around the world. However, the veracity of the findings is debatable. For example, the editors aver that the "character and qualifications of [the] authors ... made [*The Long Struggle*] a work of critical inspection and analysis, not of propaganda value for one cause or another" (Cliffe & Davidson, 1988: 7). Elsewhere in the volume, Cliffe (1988: 88) made a point about being asked by the EPLF, in its letter inviting his contribution, to appraise (read, "compare") the EPLF's performance as well as international responses in policy areas. In short, the editors sought to preempt possible charges of EPLF bias; Cliffe also implied that the EPLF had been so open-minded or at least self-assured as to initiate critical assessment by "uninvolved" outsiders. These claims are not only valid but also offer some evidence of a replicable research process.

However, the reality was far more complex. Eritrea's policy sphere was not limitless. The EPLF that had voiced its favor for objective opinion had long cornered the field; by the mid-1980s, it had become Eritrea's single dominant policy actor. Certainly, the contributors to *The Long Struggle* were not EPLF ideologues or ELF sympathizers; but they also could not have missed the EPLF's rising politico-military stature since the late 1970s (Cliffe, 1984; cf. Medhanie, 1989: 49–65). *The Long Struggle* makes EPLF positions the basic norm of Eritrean national aspirations, and its critique of EPLF was far more instrumental than may be initially apparent.

In different respects, *The Eritrean Case* and *The Long Struggle* represent both ends of a large body of literature founded on diverse intellectual traditions, but with straightforward parameters. In addition to Front imprints, the main output included several doctoral dissertations by Eritreans (e.g., Tseggai, 1981; Yohannes, 1986; Stefanos, 1989; Gayim, 1993) and a large number of shorter essays. However, few of the latter appeared in leading Africanist journals. In the approximately three decades until 1990, the *African Studies Review*, issued by the African Studies Association in the United States, published no full article or even a book review on Eritrea, with the exception of Pateman's review (1987) of Erlich's book, *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence*.<sup>(16)</sup> The *Journal of Modern African Studies*, published in the United Kingdom since 1963, had

a better record of publishing work on Eritrea than did *African Studies Review*. However, both pale compared to *Review of African Political Economy*, a leftist journal published in Britain since 1974. As Keller (1990/1991: 133; 1991: 8–9) has argued, Eritrea's case was in the “consciousness of progressive movements” around the world, but it was featured only intermittently, if at all, in mainstream and popular media in Africa and elsewhere.

Eritrea did get its message across to the world, however. A small band of intellectual activists and foot soldiers relatively unconstrained by geography and political doctrine made up the front line. Their ranks comprised two main groups: Eritrean exiles in the West whose numbers increased steadily since the late 1970s, and foreign observers, writers, and scholars. Some of the latter also held domestic anti-establishment views, while many had principled opposition to an international system controlled unfairly by a few Western countries. Some also were sympathetic to the particulars of the Eritrea case.

The “community” of Eritrean scholars, writers, and researchers invariably agreed that Eritrea had suffered dreadful historical and political wrongs and that the world had stood by or even conspired in this injustice, uncaring toward people who did not have powerful patrons. The theoretical and analytical framework of this view includes three principal elements:

- a) denied or aborted decolonization (Selassie, 1989; Yohannes, 1987)
- b) international laws and conventions on the right to self-determination (Davidson et al., 1980; Selassie, 1983; Babu, 1988; Fenet, 1988; Gayim, 1993)
- c) a revolution by oppressed peoples seeking auto-centric social change along classic Marxist-Leninist lines (Gebre-Medhin, 1989).

Africa as a whole was used in this calculus, although often incorrectly. From the point of view of Eritrean insurgents, the post-colonial order in Africa embodied all that was wrong with Ethiopia (Yohannes, 1987: 657–662; Babu, 1988: 49–51; cf. Ekpo, 1975). The decisions made by Eritrea's liberation movements, however, ultimately rested on the specific question and condition of Eritrea, and their movement was the first on the continent to seek state division and the creation of a new, independent state.

The analyses also contained a certain legal-institutional moralism. The formal slant has been scrutinized in detail using UN legal codes and other principles of jurisprudence (Selassie, 1989). The moral idea has taken various forms. Some pilloried the UN as a remorseless co-plotter against small Eritrea, neglecting to note the “federation” debacle of the 1950s. Others depicted Eritrea as a helpless victim of power plays (Yohannes, 1991; Pateman, 1990/1991). The result has been to make theory and analysis in Eritrean studies normative, well ahead of the praxis of the day; otherwise Eritrea's preferences have been sold “as is,” a package that other actors must accept without reservation.

Occasionally, analysts have failed to account for conflicting pressures within large and diverse agencies such as the UN. For example, (Pateman, 1990/1991: 33) condemned “apparent duplicity, special pleading and complicity on the part of the United Nations,” yet he then appeared to look up to international organizations for instilling a change in attitudes on Eritrea. In similar terms, Fenet (1988: 33) noted that the “advisory opinion” on Eritrea issued by the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal in May 1980 had gone unheeded by Ethiopia. The UN, of course, sometimes lacks power to enforce its rulings. However, the Peoples’ Tribunal had no authority, and no state was obligated to note its opinion, much less heed it.

In other cases, the engagement with facts was far from inter-subjective, and claims were made based on facts that were difficult to verify. Asmara and other towns in Eritrea were long under Ethiopian occupation, and the physical safety of observers and travelers could not be ensured in rural areas. Because researchers were unable to gather their own data, their analyses reflected either the views of the Ethiopian government or information provided by the Fronts. Given the ELF-EPLF conflict in the realm of ideas, observers had no option but to draw on earlier information or on partisan or publicity material. Checole (1981/1982) judged Sherman’s (1980) *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* useful but “disappointing” for these reasons. Taddia (1988) applied much of the same criticism to Firebrace and Holland’s *Never Kneel Down*, as did Keller (1990) to Gebre-Mehdin’s *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*.

## DYADIC FRAMES OF ANALYSIS

The Eritrea debate is replete with dyadic schemes that have deep roots and have spawned simplistic discourses. In a review of the first edition of Pateman’s *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, Amare Tekle (1991a) identified three main strands in the debate. The “Ethio-centric” school encompassed prominent defenders of “Greater Ethiopia” such as the Pankhursts, Ullendorff, and Rubenson, and scholars (e.g., Keller, Markakis) who seemed ambivalent about the nature of the imperial state. The fine distinctions apart, all were Ethiopianists (or “Internalists” in Tekle’s phrasing) who had not accepted the liberationist view. Tekle called the second group “Globalists.” Leading figures included Haggai Erlich and Paul Henze, those who had worn Cold War lenses while looking at Eritrea, and proffered solutions that favored either superpower. In effect, the Globalists denied Eritrea its interests.

The third group can be called “Eritro-centric.” Its ranks included Eritrean and foreign scholars and activists whose work straddled Ethiopian as well as Eritrean positions and sought to rectify imbalances in the historiography. Pateman, Richard Sherman, Bereket Selassie, and Araia Tseggai are included in this category, and Tekle (1991a: 72) absolved them all from “misrepresentations made by others.” In my view, that is a caveat to justify Tekle’s exclusion from the list of scholars well known for being less “fervent partisan(s) of

Eritrean liberation.” (Young, 1983: 231) Two such scholars are Mesfin Araya and Tekeste Negash, both Eritreans with Ph.D. degrees. Tesfatsion Medhanie is another, but he had ELF sympathies. In any case, Tekle’s classification has deep implications. It sets up a dyad between advocates of insurgent Eritrea and others. It draws the same line among Eritrean nationals, and thereby reinforces the insider-outsider dichotomy in Eritrean studies.

The literature furnishes three main variations on the dyadic theme. Popular (or perhaps populist) versions are long on righteousness and unity of purpose, such as by the use of the possessive pronouns we and our. However, they are short on substance and tend to deny the multiple divergences in social constructions of Eritrea. Lloyd Ellingson, a historian of British Eritrea, critiqued one such work (1985: 73): *The Eritrean Case* by the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal (1982):

the case for Eritrea has not been furthered by the publication of [*The Eritrean Case*], which rather than accurately and objectively expose the facts further obfuscates the issues that so desperately need explanation. In general, the vocabulary strongly suggests the writers have a political ax to grind, and Eritrea’s cause has been ungraciously used as their vehicle. Those who know little about Eritrea will not find their knowledge greatly increased by reading this book, and they are likely to be turned away from any further investigation of an issue deserving more friendly and intelligent reporting.

In turn *Eritrea: Miracleland* (Ghebrai, 1993) is a personal account that makes no claim to standard methods or rules on evidence. Nonetheless, Ghebrai’s definitions of friend and foe are too black and white to be useful. Her style also raises questions whether Eritreans had waged war against the conquest state in Ethiopia or its citizens and if a future Eritrean government would ever contemplate détente with Ethiopia. The answer to the latter had always been an emphatic yes; hence, methods such as Ghebrai’s add less value than they might seem.

A second variety of the dyadic frame blends research with “vivid reportage.” The results give the impression of history being written as it unfolds. The authors appear to be aware of – or defensive about – the biases of their data and the limited generalizations such data can support. Hence, they stop short of pushing particular meanings too strongly. Dan Connell (1993 [1997]: 6, 32–33, 42, 80–81) and Basil Davidson (1988: 189) can be included in this category. Both are acute observers and benign critics of Eritrea. Their criticism and its forms explain, in part, why, to quote a distinguished scholar (anonymous), Eritreans had been so “starry-eyed” throughout the 1980s.<sup>(17)</sup> Both also lay beneath the self-applause in the historiography (cf. Gilkes, 1991; Markakis, 1998).

The final strand of the dyadic scheme has some of the rigor of solid academic work. Most essays in *The Long Struggle* (Cliffe & Davidson, 1988a)

belong in this grouping, as does the book *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning* (Pateman, 1990). The latter has a second edition and it is a form of the “official chronicle.” Yet, its author’s interpretations usually spring from a more or less extensive literature review as well as some crosschecking of official data (Pateman, 1990 [1998]: xx). That said, Pateman’s has not *always* been disinterested commentary. In an earlier work, Pateman (1986: 25; 1990 [1998]: 97) intoned on the “carpet bagging, Amhara Christians who [had] descended on Eritrea to occupy the most profitable bureaucratic, business, and administrative positions.” This does no more than operationalize colonialism in base terms. But parallels do exist in the none-too-veiled name-calling directed at several colleagues on the other side of the Eritrea debate (e.g., Pateman, 1990 [1998]: x, xii).

For dispassion within the dyadic frame, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence* (Iyob, 1995) is a good resource. Iyob’s political sympathies are not in doubt, but her book offers a blend of discourse analysis and historical narrative; it opens on a celebratory note but dwells on the dark intrigues and dramas of Eritrea’s odyssey since the 1940s. Styan (1996b: 615) suggested that Iyob’s focus on Ethiopia’s imperial ambitions meant that she glossed over the EPLF’s hegemonic aspirations. That is true, but another problem lies in the dichotomous logic of liberationist analysis. In Eritrean studies, as in the stimulus-response models brought forth by American behaviorists in the 1960s, dyadic schemes have tended to deny an inclusive middle, the gray space that incorporates object whims and externalities, where lofty dreams meet with hard-nosed reality and where cognition can – and often does – confront ingrained belief.

## VANGUARD THEORIES

*Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea* (Gebre-Mehdin, 1989) is perhaps the most ideological academic treatise published on Eritrea during the 1980s. The study of the peasant’s place in social revolutions includes two distinct elements. One is a critique of Western scholarship on the *Horn*, especially the use of anthropology to support Ethiopia’s claims on Eritrea. The other element suggests a near perfect fit between Leninist and Maoist theories and the Eritrean revolution under the EPLF. For Gebre-Medhin (1989: 182–188; 1984; 1982/1983), this background foreclosed on elitist reforms in Eritrea. What was in process, then, was a movement from below to create a new society, built up from the ashes of the old society.

To be sure, the urban elite had retained considerable influence for various reasons. According to Gebre-Medhin (1984: 50), “peasant – based revolutions are always historically limited – backward looking, localised, fragmented and short-sighted.” Class-consciousness among the Eritrean working class was also far too weak to support a revolution led by one of their number. Above all, the “more conscious” petty bourgeoisie had “a vital interest in independence” (Harnet,

1983/1984: 4). The reasons for such interest can include a desire (or need) to spread the benefits of social progress, support the poor, or pursue some narrow group goal(s).

Gebre-Medhin argued, however, that the Eritrean petty bourgeoisie had committed class suicide. In a bid to travel the same road as their comrades in Amilcar Cabral's African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau (PAIGC), the EPLF elite had renounced their "natural" claims to status and privilege. As such, EPLF elites were the ultimate guarantors of a "democratic solidarity" between peasants and workers. By virtue of this "pact," peasants had not only ceded "leadership" of the revolution to workers. Other classes and groupings had joined in the revolution, creating support that cut across the economic and social hierarchies of the ancien regime. Meanwhile, class contradictions that might emerge during the liberation campaign would be resolved in the course of Eritrea's transition to socialism.

The inference from Gebre-Medhin's argument is clear. Class suicide by some petty-bourgeois elements is indispensable to successful revolution. However, a closer look might suggest that the petty bourgeoisie embraced revolutions to maintain their social identity, not to lose it. True class suicide can appear to blur class and socio-economic divisions; in times of social flux, appearance and the reality might seem like two sides of the same coin. In the final analysis, though, the structures and processes of revolution, including agenda setting and mobilization, would usually reinforce elite control, not diminish it. Real power is hardly ever passed on to the general populace.

Moreover, the conditions favoring revolutionary programs may differ from revolutionary outcomes; progression from one to the other is neither linear nor inevitable (Johnson, 1981). In insurgent Eritrea, land reform had lured *Kebbesa* (highland) peasants to the EPLF, not ideology in and of itself. In return, the EPLF had taken control of substantial material resources and undercut its political foes, including the nobility, clergy, and ELF (cf. Gebre-Medhin, 1984: 53–55; Cliffe, 1989: 144–145). There is no reason to believe, however, that the *quid pro quo* can outlive a war. Most, if not all, land reform programs have created new privileges as well as inequities, and history is replete with cases of revolutionary elites turned state managers, leaving, in the words of Powelson and Stock (1990), the "peasant betrayed."

There are many implications for policy and practice in Eritrea. As the Johnsons (1981: 194–195) insisted, the real test of the EPLF's commitment "to build a people's revolution from below" lay not in the "logic of protracted struggle," important though this was. Rather, it depended on whether the EPLF could construct a "non-hierarchical and democratic" society post liberation. Such an accomplishment would require an "associational form of socialism [that] can not be guaranteed in an independent Eritrea." Regardless of claims to the contrary, the EPLF had no control over the historical moment of Marxism and land reform in Eritrea. Both reflected a mix of internal and external considerations. However, the past is no guarantee of the future. "Human behavior," Eritrean President Afeworki (1994: 3) once stated in a speech commemorating the armed



struggle, “differs in times of war and peace.” The moralities and practices of peacetime can upend the codes of insurgent life. Above all, revolutions make elites far less than elites make revolutions; self-preservation is as central to elite impulses as the prospects for progress are to loyalty from the masses.

## OTHER ANALYTIC FRAMES

The foregoing conclusions have resonated in contexts from development strategy to blends of fact and fiction. *Towards Asmara* (Keneally, 1989) is an example of the latter. It is a tale of incredible human suffering and resolve that tracks sure-footed movements from narrow nationalisms to a uniform political platform in Eritrea. *Towards Asmara* espouses official discourses of the campaign and distills EPLF views. It also glosses over difficult choices between ends and means and mixes fictional strategy and history so seamlessly that few readers must wonder if its discourses create, or only mirror, “reality.” Sorensen (1991a: 76) asked whether Keneally’s narratives of the “perfect revolution” were mere morality tales or hints that Eritrea’s revolution really did or could yet symbolize “flawless perfection.” Because images do acquire their own life-worlds, Sorensen argued, those in *Towards Asmara* could throw up symbolic burdens that Eritrea might find difficult to bear – or shake off – in real life.

Many of the same burdens give shape to *Riding the Whirlwind* by Bereket Selassie (1993), another tale of the twists and turns of revolution set in Ethiopia. In one of the many critical points in the story, Desta, the idealistic academic and narrator, concedes that revolutionary leaders can become self-destructive “cop-out(s).” Desta’s down-to-earth admission followed an ill-tempered discussion at a Paris café. In the course of debate, his compatriots express sharply opposing views on how rising personal expectations might cause shifts in group interests after the revolution. Concluding this episode, Mekonnen, a self-conscious assimilated and doctoral candidate in law, declares matter-of-factly (Selassie, 1993: 257–258, italics in original):

The subject cannot be exhausted in one afternoon. But the bottom line is: nobody acts selflessly, even when he pretends to do so. At heart we are all selfish. Let’s face it, comrades. The revolution is a lie. You are all living a lie!”

It was a cruel parting shot which stunned us. “What would we gain by becoming revolutionaries, do you think?” Haile asked calmly. Nothing ruffled Haile.

[Mekonnen responded, also unperturbed.] Power, of course. It is obvious. You are interested in power, but you are not honest enough to say so. You wrap yourselves in the ideology about the right of the masses. *C’est la vérité*. I know you hate me for saying so, but it is the truth. If you can bring some good for everybody with the least harm, you have my blessing, for what it is worth. But history teaches us that revolutions

invariably do needless harm. I am not prepared to give my support to needless harm.

Mekonnen's pun may or may not have been intended, but his position is similar to Ikem Oshodi's in *Anthills of the Savannah* (Achebe, 1987). A newspaper editor in the fictional state of Kanga, Oshodi chooses a tense student gathering to parody Marxist precepts. The "dictatorship of parasites," he proclaims cynically, was the antidote to society's afflictions. Ethiopia, of course, differs from Nigeria, the putative setting for *Anthills*, however, the blocked aspirations and political entrepreneurship featured in the discourse related to both societies.

The wider point is that all politics is a purposive activity founded on different mixes of personal and group interests. The alternative discourse in *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, it follows, is no less Western or open to criticism of the motives and values of scholars and political gladiators. It is only more amenable to interpretation(s) of theory and history that favored Eritrea's then current position(s) and repudiated Ethiopia's claims to the same extent. Professor Gebre-Medhin may or may not have revised his views on elite "selflessness" in light of Eritrean statehood. Undoubtedly, however, the portrait of life in post-revolutionary Ethiopia in *Riding the Whirlwind* invited Eritreans to behold their future – and to rethink this vision while they still had the opportunity to change it.

The mix of forms and substance feature no less prominently in other works. Gayim (1993) examined from a legal perspective why state actors often put their desire for state hegemony (read, "self-preservation") before the peoples' right to self-determination. The problem is pertinent, but Gayim defines it in such a way that his findings are academic vis-à-vis institutional practices at the UN. Conversely, *The Struggle over Eritrea* (Erlich, 1983), or the debate in its wake, suggests why belief must not trump hard data when the subject under study is still unfolding. Erlich's views on the future of the Eritrea campaign were pessimistic and seemingly cast in stone. But the situation turned around soon after Erlich's work was published (Rees, 1984; Ellingson, 1986).

Araia Tseggai (1981; 1986b; 1987) has worked on infrastructure development in modern Eritrea. From a desire to refute the economic arguments employed by the British to oppose statehood in Eritrea in the 1940s, he advanced a theory of economies of scale in small states. Tseggai (1983; 1991; 1994) never denied that state size and natural resources matter, only that the resources themselves impede economic development. "Small," Tseggai (1994) argued, "can be a blessing" as it offers lower cost per capita for infrastructure construction and makes for structural flexibility vis-à-vis export markets. A small country, he insisted, is also unlikely to develop grandiose tastes. The sheer scarcity of resources narrows the options; the choice and design of optimal economic policy as well as development strategies may also be much easier than in a more auspicious setting.

At first glance, Tseggai's arguments are axiomatic. History unfolds as humanity creates virtue from necessity, as embodied greatly by self-reliance in Eritrea.

The question, though, is whether virtue must be constructed only on one's terms and what difference external settings make. Clearly, Tseggai's theory does not fully account for externalities or for wider constraints on the choices open to state actors. A small and resource-poor country is not a large consumer market; it is less able to absorb shocks from economic and trade cycles, or to manage external constraints. In a world that turns on the dictates of multinationals and supranationals, the policy instruments of a small state can only go so far. Even more pointed is whether Eritrea's self-reliance strategy can remain in place after the war ethos that long energized it has diminished. On this issue, and on a development strategy for an Eritrea that seeks full relations with the world, the EPLF's "clear ideological line" had offered little or no guidance. The picture Bereketeab (2000: 196) painted of an ELF stretched so thin by fighting that it could not plan for the future may be correct, but it also applies across the board. Despite its long grip on power, and much like Guinea-Bissau's PAIGC (Lopes, 1987: 71), the EPLF had not thought through to a post-liberation state in Eritrea.

## CONCLUSION

Eritrea was the first nation in post-colonial Africa to make the passage from imagined nation to full-fledged statehood. Young (1983) analyzed two contemporaneous cases: Katanga (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Biafra (Nigeria). However, in both cases, the issues were "resolved" without a change in the map. However, those in Eritrea who first raised the banner against the old order and its subaltern identities lost out. Their views were pushed off the stage before the campaign reached its finale. There are some parallels with uprisings in Uganda and Nigeria, although Eritrea has a longer history of insurrection.

In their scope, as well as depth, the intellectual aspects of Eritrea's campaign also set it apart. Nationalist campaigns may or may not create their own tailor-made discourse; Eritrea's, however, required new discourse and information. Eritrea had been exposed to a succession of external interests; with ingrained concepts of "self" and "other," some Eritreans wished for independence as early as the 1940s. The problem, however, was two-fold. First, Eritrea's social formations had developed differential visions of nationalism over time. The social divisions that followed in the wake of British rule were real and stymied nation-making for decades to come. Second, the regular use of concepts such as colonization, de-colonization, and self-determination seemed to offer Eritreans more of the same sort of thinking and conditions. Concepts needed rethinking to sharpen the edge of Eritrea's case. In the early- to mid-1970s, a new coalition of intellectual and politico-military interests emerged, and, with it, an expansive knowledge-production program as well as an army of foot soldiers primed to sell Eritrea's nationalist cause across the world.

*Voix Érythré*, as I have discussed in this article, embodies this new thinking. Its origins lay in disparate responses in Eritrea to the Eritrean-Ethiopian

federation, the ensuing splits in the nationalist movement in the 1960s, and the fierce contest for the minds of Eritreans as well as friends of Eritrea around the world. As a body of thought, *voix Érythrée* sought to project the EPLF and its values. Over time, *voix Érythrée* espoused a unity of society and the vanguard; it also made the EPLF and Eritrea seem like the two sides of the same coin, effectively excluding the ELF and externalizing ELF and non-EPLF interests as “others.”

The biases of *voix Érythrée* escaped scholarly attention for at least three reasons. First, privileging the war’s outcomes over its processes lent an external orientation to liberationist analysis. Looking inwards in a situation such as Eritrea’s would have seemed like a pointless diversion from the core tasks of a campaign against occupation. Second, the social situation in Eritrea had reduced the opportunity cost of such concerns. Support for the liberation agenda had expanded slowly but steadily, cutting across ethnic and class boundaries. By the mid-1970s, splits in nationalist ranks had merely slowed down the fighting, not undermined support for the wider campaign. Finally, the collapse of ELF’s military presence in Eritrea in 1981 left the EPLF free to map the terrain as it saw fit, without direct oversight by the opposition.

The result was at least twofold. First, the *quid pro quo* arrangement that began in the late 1970s between Eritrean insurgency leaders and the campaign’s intellectual foot soldiers around the world deepened. The former was left in charge of domestic politics and diplomatic matters, while the latter devised and ran hearts-and-minds programs at the international stage. Following closely was a dramatic expansion in the ranks of Eritrea advocates, both indigenous and foreign, and improvements in the liberationist paradigm and output. Thus, *voix Érythrée* became a sort of brand name on the global stage as the war began its third decade. Among the more influential works on contemporary Eritrea are some of those published since 1980.

In the quest for a political kingdom, Eritrea’s advocates focused on the defects of the institutional-legal status quo in the UN state-based system. But these were by definition normative, part of a vision of world order after the Second World War. In effect, Eritrea’s liberationist critique raised the level of discourse and blurred the boundaries between experience and hope. By doing so, it encouraged its protagonists to deny that social and political changes are slow, incremental, and uncertain, and to gloss over the specificity of key moments in the insurgent campaign. The result is an irony of sorts. Nearly all Eritrea advocates agree that its experience has been unique. In other words, the identity paradigms acclaimed in the literature mirror the experiences and conditions that created them. However, the advocates also hint that wartime practices can be divorced from their historical moment(s), or at least that a change in Eritrea’s circumstances will not induce a break with its insurgency traditions.

So what does the future hold? In my view *voix Érythrée* will decompose in parts and be reconstituted; change is the one sure thing in the social realm. As nation-building gives way to state-building in Eritrea, the bounded rationality as well as the heroism of the war will recede from direct experience to history

and memory. What Makki (1996: 475–478) called the “horizontal comradeship” and local solidarity networks of the EPLF will compete – or at least share space – with the structures and hierarchies that come with a modern state. An army without symbols of rank and privilege might not be a bad idea but would be pointless, as would Eritrea’s emergence into the world without an opening up of domestic conditions. In short, sovereign Eritrea must learn to abandon the “liberties” afforded during times of war by meeting its peoples’ collective desires and tapping into its resources. The new state can draw down the cultural capital of insurgency for only so long.

Of the many pressures driving change, three are at the forefront. Foremost is the division of labor between Eritrea-based military-politicians and intellectuals who were part of the diaspora. This “buffer zone” has helped manage conflict by keeping apart the two main wings of the Eritrean elite. The value of this divide is sure to diminish, as the war did not leave Eritrea with a philosopher-king or cult-of-personality leader who could indefinitely hold the support of the masses. Revolutionary Guinea-Bissau had a theoretician/gladiator in Amílcar Cabral, while post-apartheid South Africa had Nelson Mandela, an elder, legendary statesman with a strong moral voice with which to lead the post-apartheid era. Émigré Eritreans helped to make the *voix*, but it is not clear that they have become folk heroes in their homeland or have gained political capital. Many regard Isaias Afewerki as a brilliant military strategist and statesman, but few will compare him with Cabral much less Mandela. Above all, the ELF’s situation throughout the 1980s might be a sore point, stalling shifts in international perceptions of Afewerki and the domestic image of émigrés. Eritreans and friends of Eritrea are likely to train their sights less on the symbolism of the now rested armed struggle than on its returns.

The second pressure point follows closely on the heels of the first. A redefinition of roles between the elite and the masses, and among the elites, is likely to draw on and in turn redraw the balance between universalism and relativism. *Voix Érythréenne* had long emphasized both: the Eritrea debate is empty without its appeal to universal principles of humanity and international law on one hand, and the imperatives of its experiences on the other. However, the discourse always seemed skewed in favor of the specifics. Now, the habits of a modern state will affect ordered existence in Eritrea. The substance of such new life, how and in what forms it is or is not expressed, and what it means for relevant groups, will encourage a fresh look at the liberationist discourse. Without the bounds imposed by war, it will cost less to draw on wider criteria to show the limits of the discourse. In this process, it is likely that Eritrea will be compared with its African neighbors, including Ethiopia.

Finally, the social composition of Eritreanists will remain a touchstone of post-liberation discourse, but might become a double-edged sword in Eritrea’s state-making effort. A political superstructure built on the ethos of both insurgency and liberalism helped Eritrea wage and win a war. Will such a structure fare as well in a free Eritrea? It is very early yet, but many Eritrean exiles and friends of Eritrea in the West may see the end of armed struggle as a new

beginning, when new structures and strategies can be tried. After long espousing the *voix* and, in effect, speaking for the EPLF, many Eritrean exiles might now push for reforms of state, economy, and society in Eritrea. Generations of *tegadelti* (freedom fighters) will bring their viewpoints to the public domain too, as will civilians, most of who stayed in Eritrea throughout the war. A values conflict between local and diaspora Eritreans may be far-fetched, but the émigrés are likely to find much to recommend in the socio-economic models of the West. For the same reasons, the émigrés' values might not blend seamlessly with those that have long informed the praxis in Eritrea. Divergent visions of the future might well require increased political management. The imaginations of self and other in Eritrea will change yet again, with the ebbs and flow of power.

#### NOTES

- (1) Work on this article occurred in various phases, first in 1996–98 when I lived and worked in Eritrea, then early in 2001 during a short visit, and intermittently since. Thus, the essay draws on my direct experiences and impressions of Eritrea and from my meetings and discussions with a cross-section of Eritrean society, including some of the actors mentioned in the text. I have tried to reflect these diverse sources in the analysis, but I also chose not to attribute much of my field data so as not to breach informant confidences. I acknowledge, with thanks, all of the individuals, groups, and institutions that offered their time, funds, or other forms of support for my research. The list includes, but is not limited to, friends, students, colleagues, and respondents in Eritrea and among Eritreans of the diaspora; the Rockefeller African Humanities Institute, the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute and the Department of Afro-American Studies (all at Harvard University, Cambridge, USA); and the Program on Forced Migrations at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, also in Cambridge, USA. Last, but by no means least, I thank anonymous reviewers for their useful input. Of course, I alone am responsible for the views expressed here.
- (2) A probable exception is Sorensen's work (1991b), which contrasts Eritrean and Ethiopian identity discourses. However, this line of inquiry is not pursued in the present essay.
- (3) See Woolgar (1989) for an examination of the agent's roles in an active-passive, initiation-consolidation continuum.
- (4) Here, I present a caveat. During the 1940s, Wolde-ab Woldemariam (1905–95), the first indigenous editor of the British-sponsored, Tigrinya-language *Eritrean Weekly News* who later founded another journal titled *Hanty Eritrea* (lit. United Eritrea), published well-reasoned articles on practically all matters Eritrean, including folklore, identity, and political aspirations. However, Woldemariam's articles were more popular "nation-founding" narratives than analytic statements. Widely recognized as the "father of modern Eritrea," he also was a late convert to Eritrean independence and wrote mainly during the period outside the present essay's timeframe. Recently, Nicole Saulsberry (2001) completed a Ph.D. dissertation on Woldemariam's life and times at Stanford University, USA.
- (5) During the 1990s, Zemheret Yohannes was Chief of Cultural Affairs at PFDJ Central Office; he also served for a short while as Eritrea's Acting Minister of Information.
- (6) Pool (1998: 23n; cf. Gebre-Medhin, 1984; Cliffe, 1989: 145) conceded that his initial



argument had been “static”; ELF-EPLF relations, Pool later argued, are much too complex to be understood by simple contrasts drawn between their respective social bases and contexts.

- (7) *Shifita* originally referred to small, mobile militias that had championed early, loosely organized resistance to British rule in Eritrea. Over time, the concept has acquired contemptuous connotations; authority figures have used it to compare freedom fighters with gunmen driven more by a thirst for vengeance killings and criminality than by political ideals.
- (8) As late as the mid-2001, websites run by Eritrean Islamic Jihad [[www.eijm.org](http://www.eijm.org)], the Eritrean Liberation Front-Revolutionary Council [[www.meskerem.net](http://www.meskerem.net)], and Representatives of the Kunama People at Home and Abroad [[www.ndh.net](http://www.ndh.net)] appeared far less adroit at handling Eritrean news and viewpoints than, for instance, [www.visafric.com](http://www.visafric.com) and [www.dehai.org](http://www.dehai.org). No less sophisticated than the last two sites were [www.awate.com](http://www.awate.com) and [www.asmarino.com](http://www.asmarino.com); however, both operated largely on the fringes of official Eritrea and were more likely to be a springboard for, or even promote, independent viewpoints.
- (9) On the EPLF’s handling of the “internal crisis,” see Iyob (1995: 116–117) and Pool (1998: 25–26).
- (10) The rationale for such efforts was multi-sided. The Fronts had built social support and what Makki (1996: 477) called a “substitutionist political culture” by offering material provisions and/or “functional civil government in the rural areas where the ‘imperial’ civil administration [had] been unable and unwilling to provide the simplest services” (Hanson 1969: 3; Heiden, 1978: 17).
- (11) However, the debate on the peace formulae continued until the 1980s; those included in the process were some who had helped build the federal structure of the 1950s. See Davidson (1988), Pateman (1990b; 1991a; 1991b), Keller (1991), Tekle (1989; 1991b), Medhanie (1994b), and Scholler (1994).
- (12) (a) Asmarom Legesse trained in anthropology at Harvard and worked at Boston University and Northwestern University, among others. He was chair of the Eritrean Relief Committee in the United States (1984–91) and Academic Vice President at the University of Asmara in 1995–96. In 1998, he became leader of Citizens for Peace in Eritrea, a campaign group collecting and documenting information on the estimated 75,000 ethnic Eritreans deported from Ethiopia beginning in June 1998.  
 (b) In his Ph.D. dissertation for the University of Denver in the United States, Amare Tekle (1964) made the case for union between Eritrea and Ethiopia. This might seem puzzling in light of developments in Eritrea since the 1980s, yet Amare’s research mirrored the opinions of the elite in Eritrea’s highlands until the mid-1970s. Following a career in the Ethiopian Foreign Service, Dr. Tekle spent some time as an academic in the United States. In 1991, he became chair of the Eritrean Referendum Commission, the body that organized the vote that ushered in independence in May 1993. He also served as a member of the Constitutional Commission of Eritrea. Prior to May 1998, he was on a committee charged with drafting the electoral code. In 1999, he was named Diplomatic and Foreign Affairs Advisor to the President of Eritrea.  
 (c) Araia Tseggai earned a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, with a dissertation entitled “The economic viability of independent Eritrea” (1981). As Director of the Research and Information Center on Eritrea in North America, Dr. Tseggai served as editor of its *Journal of Eritrean Studies*; he also founded and edited the *Horn Review*, a short-lived independent journal. After 1991, he became President of the University of Asmara and served for a short while as Vice Minister of Finance and as Governor of the (Central) Bank of Eritrea before becoming founding

General Manager of the Housing and Commerce Bank of Eritrea.

(d) Gaim Kibreab has probably been the most influential Eritrean voice in refugee studies. Dr. Kibreab, once also a refugee, trained in anthropology in Sweden and authored several empirical studies of Eritrean refugees, especially those in the Sudan. He has taught at the Open University and at the South Bank University in London.

- (13) Confirmed in a conversation with the author in January 2001.
- (14) It is necessary to distinguish between “intellectual activists” and “academic practitioners” as they relate to Eritrean liberationist discourse. Intellectual activists are, to appropriate Young’s words (1983: 231), the “fervent partisan(s) of Eritrean liberation”: participants, observers, writers, and scholars alike who sought to sustain or change the attitudes and opinions of relevant groups in favor of insurgent Eritrea. Academic practitioners are, on the other hand, participants and connoisseurs of the Eritrea debate, both scholars and non-scholars, for whom Eritrea was less a primary campaign or advocacy issue than a professional academic or free standing “other” focal subject. The categories are, of course, not mutually exclusive; many in the Eritrean intelligentsia and non-Eritreans who had joined in the campaign for political, ideological, or other reasons straddled the boundaries, or moved back and forth between these positions. Overall, however, intellectual activists likely found the threshold much less difficult to cross than did academic observers.
- (15) RICE’s local counterpart since independence, the Research and Documentation Center (RDC), is part of Eritrea’s Ministry of Information and Culture.
- (16) A computer search (by subject) of *African Studies Review*’s online index for 1958–90 yielded no single article focusing on Eritrea. This contrasts sharply with the many articles on Ethiopia.  
See [http://www.sas.upenn.edu/African\\_Studies/ASA/index\\_subj1.html](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/African_Studies/ASA/index_subj1.html).
- (17) Anonymous source; the conversation took place in Eritrea in 1997.

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