REVIEW ARTICLE

A Review of Three Approaches to the Eritrean Nation as a Case for Nation before Identity

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The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Dominance, Resistance, Nationalism 1941-1993

By Ruth Iyob
Cambridge University Press, 1997, 216 pages, $29.99, ISBN: 9780521595919

Identity Jilted or Re-Imaging Identity: The Divergent Paths of Eritrean and Tigrayan Nationalist Struggles

By Alemseged Abbay
The Red Sea Press, 1998, 250 pages, $60, ISBN: 9781569020715

Soldiers, Martyrs, Traitors and Exiles: Political Conflict in Eritrea and the Diaspora

By Tricia Redeker Hepner
University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009, 272 pages, $26, ISBN: 9780812221510

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Observers of African political developments are puzzled by the strange absence of strong and effective secession movements on the continent. The case of multi-ethnic Eritrea's nationalism and its successful struggle to gain full independence from Ethiopia still represents an exception to the general trend of no separations from post-colonial states. The Eritrean exceptionality warrants a closer look at the peculiarities of this East African country, particularly the maturation of a separate political identity that has been able to support its thirty-year-long struggle for independence, despite the fact of the common main *ethnies* on both sides of the conflict and of what is now the border between those two countries.

This review article examines three approaches to Eritrean nationalism. Ruth Iyob (1995) looks at the imagined Eritrean citizenry that has developed a sense of itself over a span of fifty years. Alemseged Abbay (1998) points to the importance of the ethno-symbolic factors that were instrumental in building the identity and subsequent diversionary paths of ethnonationalism among the Tigrayans, the main Eritrean *ethnie*. Finally, Tricia Hepner (2009) sees the Eritrean diaspora as the instrumental component of the community that spawned and nurtured Eritrean nationalism, as well as a possible place where this nationalism matured through the diaspora's interactions with the homeland, seen by them as the party-state. Since Eritrea is completely inaccessible due to the nature of its oppressive political regime, these works are very valuable in their attempt to explain the exceptional case of Eritrea.

Historical Approach

Iyob's book is an authoritative historical account of Eritrea's political history. *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence* begins with her observation of "the 'conglomerate of different communities' that had been strangers to each other" in the occupied Ethiopian territory that became Italy's "first-born colony" (p. 1). Iyob situates the birth of the dream of an independent Eritrean state between the interactions of the Eritrean population among itself in reaction to three factors: Italian colonization, the international state system, and Ethiopian hegemony.

The colonial construct was the first concept of Eritrean self-awareness as a separate group, with which all its later rulers had to grapple. The nine Eritrean ethnic groups developed a collective sense of separateness from their powerful hegemonic neighbor, Ethiopia. As a result of the Italian defeat in WWII, the territory of Eritrea came under temporary British rule between 1941 and 1952. In that decade, Eritreans began to think of themselves as a separate people, despite their history of being part of the ancient Empire of Ethiopia. Consequently, during the British mandate, two streams developed among Eritreans: one that advocated for union with Ethiopia and the other, a regional nationalism that advocated for independence.

The propensity of the international structure to accept international and regional hegemonies caused the Eritrean struggle to persist while crystallizing distinguished Eritrean nationalism (pp. 23-26). Ethiopian regional hegemony was based on domination and consensus developed by invocation of Hedley Bull's "overriding principles" and legitimized through effective Ethiopian diplomacy, while opposition to it was effectively contained by military means (p. 27). Because of that, and despite the "manifestly Pan-African" Eritrean orientation (pp. 47-54), Eritrean nationalists faced an uphill battle in their quest for self-determination against the geopolitical arrangements of the international systems structured around Cold War politics and Africa's own perceptions and romantic notions of Pan-Ethiopian-ness. Eritrean elites claimed the right to "national self-determination on the basis of their identity as a former Italian colony whose decolonization was thwarted by Ethiopian intervention" (p. 53). During that time, ordinary Eritreans were not only developing a sense of their distinctiveness but also being 'habituated' to the idea of being a distinct polity capable of articulating and acting upon its own demands.

However, these early signals of Eritrean regional nationalism during the initial stage of the Federation were met with Ethiopian annexation in 1952 and the fleeing of Eritrean political leaders to Egypt and Sudan (p. 91). At this juncture, Eritreans developed a consensus about their common experience through coherent discourse and meaningful symbols during the incubation period (pp. 95-96). Regarding this, Iyob suggests that "the evolution of a common identity in the face of an external threat, which began with the loss of autonomy in the 1950s, should not be mistaken for a fully-fledged national identity" but rather viewed as a reflexive response to external threat that should be considered only as a foundation for a claim of potential national identity by nationalist elites, which had yet to mature (p. 96).

The annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia in 1952 heightened the fears of the Eritrean Muslim population, which eventually spearheaded an armed resistance through the organization of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) against Ethiopia's domination (p. 97). The ELF's secular platform proved to be the generator of the further struggle for independence in at least two ways: first, through its direct influence regarding mobilization strategies, and second, as the opposition's point of orientation for the resolution of the challenges of the fragmented sectarian nationalisms of different Eritrean groups by offering a completely new, unifying secular-based nationalism. The response to the ELF came with the formation of another Muslim-led organization, Eritrea's Liberation Movement (ELM), which "used secularization as a strategy to reconcile the Muslim-Christian schism" (p. 98) to create a common sense of unity of purpose (p. 106) and take their nationalism further. In that sense, the process of the formation

of a singular Eritrean national idea was not different from those of other sovereign nations, where a national consensus was built over time and through "inter-elite power struggles and bloody conflicts" (p. 121).

The struggle of the Eritrean people was, in fact, waged on two levels: armed campaigns and the construction of a Pan-Eritrean political agenda (p. 123). That agenda was best articulated by the EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front), a secular-based organization that splintered from the ELF. The EPLF rejected the Pan-Islamic and Pan-Arab tenets of the struggle and relied on the discourse of the African anti-colonial fight (p. 123). Iyob concludes by pointing out that after the long liberation struggle, the people of Eritrea "have emerged with a strong sense of nationalism which binds the different ethnic and religious groups as citizens fused into a single people" (p. 143).

The fact that Iyob does not properly examine Eritrean Muslim-Christian dynamics or the internal dynamics of the EPLF's interactions with the multi-ethnic Eritrean population is a major deficit in an otherwise very good book. She treats the Eritrean people as if they composed a single community with a consensus around a shared colonial experience, which is not yet a full-fledged national identity. But the lowland Muslim ethnic groups did not share the same colonial experience as the highland Christian Eritreans. The Christian highlanders were favored by all the colonizers: Italians, Ethiopians, and especially the British. Additionally, the long struggle for independence was started by Muslim Eritrean soldiers under the leadership of Hamid Idris Awate. Iyob does try to explain their schism by broadly suggesting that it was effectively overcome by the EPLF through their non-religious liberal tactics and policies. But again, she glosses over the immensely important role played by Osman Saleh Sabbe in establishing the EPLF as a viable option, not only domestically among wary Eritrean Muslims but also internationally among powerful Muslim donors without whom EPLF's early survival might not have been possible. This shortcoming leaves our main question unanswered: how exactly a sense of commonness was created among various groups to carry the resistance through such a long war of independence. That question is perhaps better answered by Abbay (1998), who examines how the leadership of the independence struggle managed to create a sense of nationhood through a series of well-planned moves.

Anthropological Approach

Like Iyob, Alemseged Abbay uses a somewhat historical approach. He reveals more anthropological nuances to suggest the primordial basis for the birth of Tigrayan nationalism that was then used in an instrumental way to further two separate struggles: for the independence of Eritrea and to achieve Tigrayan domination in Ethiopia. Abbay argues that "wars and miscalculated state war policies may

be historical contingencies that offer human actors opportunities to mold identity configurations. As such, the invention of identity becomes mainly a post-victory phenomenon" (p. 8). This was the case with the Eritreans in general and the Eritrean Tigrayans in particular, who at the right moment "jilted" their common political identity from their kin across the Mareb.

Abbay begins by articulating that the "Tigrayan, south of the Mareb River and the Kebessa 'highland' North of the Mareb River, are ethnically one people, tied by a common history, political economy, myth, language and religion" (p. 1). They maintain an imperial memory of Greater Tigrinya, manifested through a unitary trans-Mareb history until their separation by the European conquest and the establishment of an Italian *colonia primogenital.*

Besides historical memories, the Tigrinya *ethnie* on both sides of the Mareb also share a language and a strong sense of religious devotion to Coptic Orthodox Christianity. There were no initial signs that they would support any program that would set them apart from the dominant Ethiopian nationalism. Abbay notes that since an independent Eritrea had never existed, people could not imagine they could "go it alone" (p. 36). That impetus came from the policies of the aggressive *amharization* of the country (pp. 84-90). As Abbay states, "mass Eritrean political identity consciousness, therefore, began to develop when Eritreans met the Amhara" (p. 97), which at that time represented Imperial Ethiopia.

Although Abbay provides us with a much thicker description of how the consensus for independence among Eritrean Tigrayans developed, he does not dwell much on Tigrayan relations and interactions with other Eritrean ethnic groups. That could leave an uninformed reader with the sense that Eritrea is primarily a Tigrayan nation-state and elide the plural ethnic reality of the country. More attention to Tigrayan interactions with Muslim lowlanders could help us understand why the Eritrean pull factor was stronger. The fact that Tigrayans constitute half of the Eritrean population and are ethnically and religiously monolithic, as opposed to the much more ethnically diverse Muslim lowlanders, creates an urgency to explain the development of separateness among the Tigrayan group first. Thus, Abbay could have paid more attention to the dynamics between Tigrayan and other Eritrean groups than merely to the relations of Tigrayans with the Amhara people and Ethiopia. This shortcoming is partly addressed by Hepner (pp. 43-49), who describes the EPLF's statement on "Our Struggle and Its Goals" as an effort to address lowland Muslim communities' apprehensions regarding the Christian Tigrayan domination of the group.

The Eritrean Tigrayans did not have to give up their primordial imaginings and sense of identity but rather had only to adjust them or move ethnic boundaries in a way to "satisfy"

new political aspirations. To instrumentalize feelings of identity and show the Eritrean population what was possible, the EPLF used their military victories, popular folk culture, soccer games, and stadiums, as well as recent historical experiences of Eritrean existential peril at the hands of the murderous policies of the Ethiopian Dergue-led regime. As poorly dressed Ethiopian troops came to Eritrea in 1952 wearing sandals, people in Eritrea who were used to wearing shoes and to seeing well-uniformed Italian and British soldiers with boots were immediately surprised by what they saw as a very unequal level of modernization between the "masters" and the "dominated," wherein the latter group had the upper hand (p. 87). The sense of superiority felt by the Eritrean Tigrayans eventually turned into hostility, and open military confrontation between Ethiopians and local Eritreans when many Tigrayans first joined the Muslim-led ELF and later swelled the ranks of the secular-led EPLF. In that sense, the Eritrean case of nationalism is uncommon because it developed without separate ethnic consciousness to provide a basis for political mobilization along ethnic lines.

Although these instances of Eritrean encounters with Amharan Ethiopia provided an impetus for the initial Eritrean nationalism, the ruthlessness of Ethiopian policies eventually led to a sense of solidarity among the trans-Marebian peoples and their eventual political departure from Ethiopia. However, the experiences of the same *ethnie* on each side of the river were somewhat different, as famine and displacement were inflicted more on the Eritrean Tigray communities, which led them to part from their Ethiopian ethnic kin.

Abbay notes that "the primordially dictated Tigrayan insurgency emerged as a prodigious movement that enabled Eritreans to realize their otherwise impossible aspirations. Without the Tigrayan insurgency, the hurdles faced by Eritrean nationalism were too formidable (p. 223). Nevertheless, primordial sense had to be supplemented with several decades of separate lives and economic transformations that helped generate separate senses of identity between the two halves of the same *ethnie*. This separation is especially more likely outcome when a state pursues a genocidal war policy on a territory, and that is how the Eritrean case shows us that mobilization can occur prior to collective identity (p. 233).

The Diaspora Memory Approach

Tricia Hepner looks at the contemporary sense of national identity and the differing notions of that identity across the transnational space in Eritrea. She situates her studies in history and the different narratives upon which Eritrea was built. Partly due to her inability to do in-person research in Eritrea, she bases her anthropological inquiry on the *idea* of Eritrea as it is played out in the Eritrean diaspora. She notes that the Eritrean struggle was, from the beginning, diaspora-based, a fact that

shaped what later became transnational Eritrea (p. 15).

She argues that the importance of the diaspora was established with the emergence of the ELF, first in Egypt and later in Sudan (p. 13). Because of the eventual victory of the EPLF over the ELF, many of the Muslim activists of the latter went into exile, and this process significantly shaped the initial armed struggle for independence. Hepner states that the diaspora and their clandestine associates back home utilized the transitional social field to advance visions and platforms that were at odds with their authoritarian nationalist state (p. 190). We should note that such a situation makes it harder to reach a consensus on the "new" Eritrean identity markers, especially due to increasingly limited space for Eritrean political dialogue.

Engulfed in the narrow political space of the one-party state, obsessions with national security and sovereignty heighten anxieties about 'foreign' interventions (p. 25), where anything foreign is presented as an existential threat to Eritrea. In such a world, the regime and the people of territorial Eritrea are split between the need for the diaspora to help them and the fear of the potentially divisive influence of the same diaspora. Hepner reminds us that these trans-nationalisms may be a key factor in eroding state sovereignty (p. 218). That is why the struggle between the Eritrean regime and the diaspora over the "official definitions of the person, the citizen, the community, the society and the nation itself" (p. 14) could be fertile ground for the development of a new (unifying) Eritrean identity, and it is indeed warranted for Hepner to try to parse these interactions.

Hepner comes closest to answering the question of how the Eritrean nationalism project managed to steer the struggle effectively without a clear, preexisting Eritrean identity. She notes that the EPLF's synthetic nationalism "adopted the language and logic of blood-kin connections but reorients them towards the national family" (p. 53). The EPLF did *manage* to present itself as an alternative kin group; Hepner notes that it even fostered families among its fighters and raised children collectively, like any other kin group. Therefore, previous identities were ruptured and re-created by the EPLF itself. Its opponent, the ELF, on the other hand, tried to drive its pluralistic nationalism along the lines of traditional, pre-nationalist kin groups and lost–most likely due to their members' loyalties split between kin or the ELF. They eventually learned that loyalties to "original" kin groups often prevailed, and fighters were hesitant to leave their kin regions and fight elsewhere in Eritrea. Therefore, the Eritrean case shows how the success of nationalism is predicated on the effective rupture of pre-nationalist identities and the creation of a new one that can support local nationalist agendas.

The sense of Eritrean national identity today faces new hurdles, signaling that the process is ongoing, as it should be.

While "the party-state claims to defend sovereignty in terms of territory, national policies, and economic development, the real exercise of its authority seems to pivot on the capacity to survey, discipline, and punish" (p. 219). Using memories of the struggle and the price paid for independence, the party-state has long utilized "reference to the categories of soldiers, martyrs, traitors, and exiles" (p. 219) to categorize members of the diaspora according to their orientation toward official policies. In that way, the EPLF returned to the beginning of the long path towards independence when they themselves replaced the ELF policies of pluralistic nationalism with an all-encompassing and closely guided synthetic nationalism.

While Hepner provides us with useful evidence of the development of Eritrean identity, she leaves some important issues unresolved. First, she does not consider the persistently strong line of division among different Eritrean ethnicities, which in the past almost split the country into three parts: Afar tribes in the South, Christian highlanders in the West, and Sudan-leaning ethnic groups in the North. That invisible line of division remains strong among Eritreans. Also, the book focuses mainly on a trans-national setting and the diaspora in the U.S. To further examine the question, more substantial field research elsewhere in the diaspora at least are needed. Last, longitudinal depth on the research of the Eritrean diaspora would significantly enrich Hepner's study and improve her findings. The huge number of recent *émigrés* from the country opens the possibility of such an extension of her Eritrean diaspora study.

Conclusion

Despite the three books' noted shortcomings, they all provide solid information on how Eritrean nationhood and identity began to form and mature and how it continues to transform through a transnational conception of the country. Such a complex national identification project cannot be forced upon the population, as was seen in the attempts of Ethiopia's Amharization of Eritreans. The project will instead require a willful merging of the existing cultural traits of different Eritrean *ethnies* to create a new national Eritrean polity. In any case, the ongoing case of Eritrea provides a good case to observe *how* new identification becomes meaningful to form a basis for social activities that are needed for a group to be regarded as a nation.

Examples provided in these books show that a group of people under certain conditions may turn into a nation before the full formation of a group's salient identity. However, the paradox that the country is currently experiencing between transnational essence and isolationism is the result of its long and painful struggle of almost half a century, in which political strategies established long ago are now hard to give up. On independence, the country was immediately faced with the challenges posed by globalization, which even more developed states

have yet to resolve. As is often the case, once they take charge of a state, former insurgents do not tolerate diversity but rather emphasize a single ideology as the exclusive product of a state. But this propensity of the former insurgents who are now governing Eritrea should be considered a temporary phase, which may be seen more as a "regime mentality" that grows out of an anti-colonial struggle rather than a coherent ideology, and one that will change once people and rulers become accustomed to the new roles of citizens and leaders.

It should be stated that all three books do a very good job of examining different aspects of the long-drawn-out construction of Eritrean identity, and all are valuable contributions to the literature on identity and nationalism. However, we can note that Abbay's anthropological method comes closest to answering our main question of how a new political identity carried the Eritrean peoples through a long and costly struggle for independence. Abbay showcases how nationalism is not a rudimentary type of collective action since it *does not* depend on a prior homogeneous collective identity. Rather, as we can observe from Abbay's accounts of the Eritrean struggle, nationalism is a process that aspires to produce such an identity, which people later adopt or not. So, there is nothing inevitable about nationalism, neither at the outset nor the end, and if it is to happen, it must be a top-down process.

Finally, we can see that the national liberation struggle, which was initiated as a religious rebellion, was eventually replaced by a full-fledged, anti-religious nationalism that brought the struggle to a successful end. Therefore, contrary to the argument that religion is a "force multiplier" in war, in the case of Eritrea, we can see that secular nationalism was able to overtake religion in a war of national liberation. This realization may have interesting implications for the many contemporary armed struggles that were initiated through religion as 'cosmic struggles,' but which, as time passed, became more nationalistic in taste, method, and aim. Obviously, the Eritrean case shows that secular nationalism as an "ideology of order" prevailed over religion in the struggle for national liberation.

In any case, Eritrea emerged out of its liberation struggle as a free state, yet without a clearly defined national identity or state-driven "nationalizing nationalism," and is still trying to produce one that can unite the population. Notably, these three books provide a reason for optimism as they show the courage, resilience, and resolve of the Eritrean people to survive and remain free. This optimism is founded on Hepner's observation that the political identities embedded in either the ELF or the EPLF continue to endure, perhaps *because* of the never-ending civil war among them. The letter 'E' in both cases, however, suggests that the feeling of Eritrean identity is here to stay, even though it has yet to be defined completely through the quest for "*hadde hizbi, hadde libi*."